



HER PRETTY KNIGHT

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SAPPHIC LADY KNIGHTS BOOK ONE

Her Pretty Knight

Sapphic Lady Knights, Volume 1

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Published by Mariah Rae Birch, 2024.

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First published in 2024 by Mariah Rae Birch.

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Cover design by Mariah Rae Birch.

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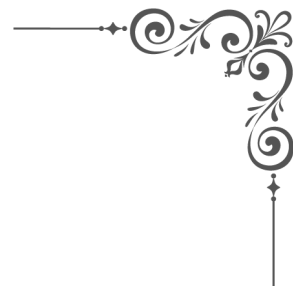
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To my loved ones
who told me to write.
Thank you.



CHAPTER 1

A BARGAIN FOR FREEDOM

Hostile iron chilled Della's skin. She curled her fingers between the narrow bars of her cage, reaching for the freedom beyond. Annet's pale fingers appeared through the darkness, mirroring Della's, from where she rode in an identical cart. Confined by a lattice of unresponsive metal, Annet was only an arm's length away, but no arm could reach her.

They had managed to run for over three years since their last escape. Della had to believe they would find a way out again. They always did.

A summer wind slipped restlessly past as the white moon illuminated the forest just enough to darken the shadows cast by the sparse hemlocks. Their captors slumbered around a burned-down fire nearby, and the weary horses snuffled peacefully.

Della tried to open her senses, but all she found was a chilling, blurry blankness. She couldn't use her magic in the metal cage, as was its intention. She knew this, and yet she tried. To not try would have been giving up, and Della refused to do that.

It was too dark to see well, but Della felt Annet watching her.

"We'll find a way," Della promised, as she had done too many times before.

"Yes, I know. I'm not worried. You'll do that for me."

"What else are big sisters for?"

Della smiled at Annet's puff of whispered laughter. She leaned into the sound. It would be her only comfort tonight.

Someone was moving quite unstealthily through the forest. Undergrowth rustled. A branch snapped.

Della shifted to press her face to the other wall of her cage, her weariness forgotten as her eyes scanned the darkness.

A figure stalked through the trees, coming straight for Della's cart. Perhaps their escape would be easier than she had hoped. Desperate people did desperate things, and Della was not above using that to her advantage.

The figure caught the edge of an ermine-lined hood, dropping it elegantly back. Della didn't need to see the silver tiara on the woman's proud forehead to know exactly who she was.

"Your Highness," Della greeted her. "What an unexpected delight."

"Witch."

"Forgive me if I do not bow. It's rather cramped in here."

A well-bred nostril flared. "I see you have not changed."

Della grinned. "How is Snowball?"

"Snowbell," Princess Cordelia corrected acidly. "He is doing well, actually. Though my father has relegated him to the labyrinth, now he is grown." The princess tilted her head. "I've always wondered...why did you save him? You could have simply run."

Della shrugged. "I have a soft spot for deadly things."

The princess's Snowbell had been the unwitting means of Della and Annet's escape five years ago, during a brief and unpleasant stay in the Palace of Hevalon's dungeon. When a tear-stained princess showed up outside their cell, carrying her fledgling basilisk who had managed to petrify himself, Della had convinced the princess to open the door. They'd lingered only long enough for Della to free the basilisk's soul, which was caught between the layers of the living and the dead.

Della wasn't heartless, just practical.

"Is that what you came here in the dead of night to ask me, Your Highness?" Della asked. "Why I helped your pet all those years ago?" The metal was itching her skin, and she was eager to get out of its clutches.

"Of course not." The princess glared at her. "I have an issue I need dealing with."

"Most people do. What is yours?"

"An arranged marriage to Prince Valin of Glea. I have never met him, and don't plan to. Our families just betrothed us as part of the latest peace treaty between our kingdoms. I cannot simply break the engagement, but I have no intention of marrying him."

"Why not?"

The princess raised her chin. “I have better things to do than be traded away to a foreign land and saddled with a man.”

“And what do you want me to do about it?” Della wasn’t overly keen on murdering a prince. When people needed Della’s help, it was usually to do with death—either prevention, or hastening. And she was fairly certain Princess Cordelia wasn’t worried about the prince’s health.

“Go in my stead.”

Della tried not to laugh. “I have done many strange things, Your Highness. But I have never been a queen.”

“You won’t be. Merely a temporary imposter. I need you to take my place, to be seen there and show our kingdom’s goodwill and intent. Then I need you to die. Peacefully.”

So Della only needed to murder herself, not a prince.

“I see.” She was amused and impressed by the audacity of the wild scheme. “And being presumed dead will make it easier for you to disappear?”

“I have already made arrangements. Can you do it?”

“The death part, I can do. But you are Princess Cordelia. People will notice I am not you.”

“No, they won’t. I have never been to Glea, and I am not known there. And you have to admit that we look markedly alike. I noticed it when we met before. It’s what gave me this idea. Dressed in silk, with a bit of black dye in your hair to darken it more, and you will do fine.”

Della raised her eyebrows. “You may be unknown by sight in Glea, but what about everyone else?”

The princess shook her head, looking annoyed. “I am going alone, and none plan to follow. Things between our kingdoms are still tense. No one who knows me will be there.”

Della’s features were similar to the princess, but not enough to be mistaken for each other. Della doubted a bit of dye would fool anyone. But she decided not to argue too hard against a plan for their escape.

“And how temporary will my princessly reign be?”

“The wedding date is in three months. I wish to die just before. It will keep the details of inheritance simpler.”

“My sister will need to accompany me.” Della angled her head toward Annet.

The princess hummed, turning resentful eyes on Annet, clearly recalling their previous meeting. “I don’t think so. She will stay with me.”

“No.”

“I need some assurance you will honor your word.”

“No.”

“You aren’t in a position to make demands.” The princess raised her chin again. The posture and moonlight on her upturned face highlighted the similarities to Della’s own. It made Della wonder. She’d never known who her father was. And didn’t have any desire to find out. One parent had been quite enough.

“And you need our help,” Della countered. “In order for me to die as you wish, I will need her connection to return to my body afterward. I’d rather not *stay* dead. It’s not negotiable.”

The princess turned away. “I will look for a more skilled witch, then.”

“Wait,” Annet called, and the princess paused. “I can give you assurance another way.”

“Netty...” Della warned, but Annet ignored her.

“I am not like my sister,” Annet said, her voice quiet but carrying. “I do not deal with death, but rather, with compulsion.”

“Yes, I remember,” the princess snapped. That last time they had met, Annet had used her magic to keep the princess quiet as they ran.

“I can seal a promise with magic,” Annet said. “Guarantee it.”

“How? What would happen if it broke?”

“The easiest way to describe it would be...I would die.”

Della wanted to throw up at that overkind explanation.

“Convenient, when one of you has death magic. She could just stop it.” The princess waved dismissively toward Della.

“No,” Della said hollowly. “I couldn’t.”

There wouldn’t be a soul left to stop. Della could not bring back what no longer existed. The magic’s sickness was far worse than any death.

The princess looked between the sisters, clearly reluctant to trust them.

“You won’t find another death witch in one week, Your Highness,” Della pressed. “And not one who resembles you.” Della herself had only ever heard of one other with her abilities. And he’d been consumed by the sickness many years ago.

The princess narrowed her eyes. “Fine. My own guards are ready to dispatch yours. They await my word. It will be done tonight. And I have more watching us right now, so don’t even think about trying anything clever.”

Della glanced around and noted the dark shapes lurking, not quite blending into the shadows. She looked over at Annet, who nodded.

It was a vague and dangerous plan. Too many things could go wrong.

“Then have it done,” Della said, already regretting it. “I agree to your bargain.”



“GAL, WHERE THE FUCK is Ollie?” Prince Valin demanded.

Galeon let her hand fall rather than completing the knock she had intended. The prince’s shirt hung open as he whirled and rummaged through his jewelry bureau, tossing and pushing aside pieces worth more than Galeon’s annual wage.

“I have no idea, Your Highness,” Galeon replied calmly. “Shall I go find him?”

“No, just...help me.” Prince Valin looked up at her, a poorly concealed glimmer of panic on his handsome face.

“Of course.”

“I am trying to find the dragon scale brooch,” Prince Valin explained, dumping out the contents of a studded velvet box.

Galeon turned to the knight beside her, Sir Alvor, who anticipated Galeon’s order. “I will go fetch Ollie, sir,” Sir Alvor said.

As Galeon stepped into the prince's chambers, her metal-clad boots echoed on the marble stone floor, and she approached her liege to stare at the assortment of glittering jewels and rarities.

"Do I have your permission to look, Your Highness?"

"Yes, yes," he muttered. "It is set in gold."

This was not part of Galeon's normal duties, but it was currently her mission. If her prince needed her to look for his brooch, then she would. Galeon opened a purple velvet box with clammy palms.

Together, they tore apart the jewelry bureau. After searching another four boxes and seven drawers, Sir Alvor still had not returned, and Galeon found her thoughts echoing Prince Valin's. *Where was Ollie?*

"How about sapphire in gold, Your Highness?" Galeon asked hopefully, indicating a piece dripping with tiny blue jewels and a center stone the size of a child's fist. "Or perhaps griffin talon?"

"No, I want to wear the dragon."

"And you shall," Galeon stated, as sweat trickled down the back of her neck, soaking the linen shirt beneath her chainmail. She returned her attention to finding it.

Something priceless shattered against the far wall. The prince ran his hands over his face, then through his shoulder-length hair, crushing the natural curls.

"It will be found," Galeon assured him.

The prince stalked over to the tall, arched window and stared out. "We had word she is ahead of schedule. She's arriving today," Prince Valin told the glass.

Galeon now understood his agitation. "Congratulations, Your Highness."

Prince Valin snorted, and when he turned to look at Galeon, he had a smirk on his face. "Congratulations?"

"On your bride and upcoming marriage," Galeon clarified, which only made the prince's smile widen.

"I thank you most sincerely, Sir Galeon."

Galeon knew Prince Valin was mocking her for her formality, but she only nodded.

The prince sighed again. “I want to make a good first impression,” he said.

“I am certain she will be impressed regardless of your brooch choice.”

Prince Valin smiled again and playfully patted Galeon on the cheek as he walked past. “Ah, but women care about these things, Gal. Haven’t you heard?”

“Whatever you say, Your Highness,” Galeon agreed easily.

Prince Valin chuckled as he threw himself down into a large armchair in front of the hearth.

“You did send for me,” Galeon ventured. “Was it to assist with your brooch, or another matter?”

“Forget the brooch for now. Come here.”

Galeon went, obediently standing at attention beside his chair.

“And sit. Relax.”

Galeon sat on a stool, but she didn’t relax.

“I’ve been told my bride only has a handful of servants arriving with her. Why she is not better guarded is beyond me. Hevalon have always been reckless, cheap bastards but—no, I shouldn’t say that anymore, should I. I may not know her, but she is going to be my queen. And I will have her protected.”

“Of course. I will assign a detail to her. Do you have a preference, or shall I handle it?”

The prince shook his head. “You will guard her.”

Galeon paused her mental assessment of her knights. “But I guard you.”

“Yes, and you do an exceedingly competent job. Only the best will do for my bride.”

Something like panic flared in Galeon’s chest. She liked her position and had worked damn hard to get it. “I have served you for ten years,”

Galeon said, not sure how to protest.

“You have. And that is why I am trusting you with this. Sir Alvor is less amusing than you are, but he is also capable of bothering me. For a while, at least.”

“If that is what you wish.”

“It is. At least until the wedding, when something more permanent can be arranged. I trust you, Gal. More than anyone.”

Those sincere words soothed Galeon’s disquiet. She stood a little taller than before. She owed everything to the prince. If he wished her to guard his bride, then Galeon would do so with her life.

“I am honored, Your Highness.”

Prince Valin grinned up at her. “I know. Now, go help track down my wayward manservant, will you?” His expression darkened. “And have someone look for a new one.”



THE RIVER GLEA FLOWED from headwaters deep in the mountains, carving out a path to the sea. The palace and its adjoining city sat defiantly in the river’s path, forcing it to divert around on either side and forming an island at the center of the frothing current. When the city had run out of room to expand outward, it had apparently started going up. It hummed with energy, a tangled maze of structures, cramped streets, and bridges over houses, whose only order came from the practicalities of making it fit.

Della pressed her face against the plush interior of the carriage and peered through the curtains as they rolled past the palace gates and into the inner courtyard.

Marble stretched and echoed all around, paving the ground beneath their wheels and climbing up the walls and spires of the impressive fortress. Smooth white, pale pinks, and faint greens enclosed them, shielding the vibrancy of the rumbling, shambling city beyond. The only softness came from the lush trees, weeping wisteria, and yellow roses placed artfully to hide branches of thorns in the corners.

Della adjusted her tiara. She shivered as the metal refused to warm against her skin and the light silk of her overly long sleeves wafted in an unfamiliar way.

She looked at Annet, who would be posing as her maid. Annet had cropped her hair short, and Della was briefly envious as the summer day permeated the stuffy carriage. Half of Della's own freshly dyed hair crowned the top of her head in a braid, the rest left long in an elegant attempt to hide the irregularity of her neck.

The carriage rolled to a halt.

Annet squeezed Della's arm in support, and then scooted an appropriate distance away as their driver opened the door. He was loyal to the real princess, and one of the few people who knew of their plot. Della was glad he was the one to welcome her into her new, brief life. She placed her hand in his and climbed down into the heat of the afternoon and the role she would be playing.

A handful of liveried people gathered in the courtyard, and Della's gaze skipped over them all to focus on the man who was to be her almost husband, standing proudly near the front.

His silver crown was so bright it was nearly white, curling ostentatiously upward in opposition to the waves of sandy hair falling just above his collar. His shirt was crisp beneath a coat of embroidered gold and held closed by an oversized dragon scale brooch. Della guessed he was near her own age, in the later half of his twenties, and a fading boyishness clung to the edges of his features. Between his squared, clean-shaven cheeks, and blue eyes, Prince Valin was fit for any princess's wildest dreams. Della absently wondered if Princess Cordelia knew the sort of man she had so desperately evaded. Too late now.

Della forced a smile to her lips.

The prince stepped forward, taking her hand and bowing over it.

"Welcome, Princess Cordelia," he said, his eyes roaming her face, assessing her as much as she was him.

Della kept her chin held high. "Prince Valin. I am glad to finally meet you."

“The poets and artists did a poor job of portraying your beauty.”

The irony of the flattery amused her. “Then perhaps you should hire some better ones.”

Prince Valin stared at her, and then he grinned. “We shall begin the search at once. You must help me choose.” Still holding her hand, he swept it smoothly into the crook of his arm, turning with her toward the open palace doors. “You will be tired from your journey. I’ll show you to your room so you may rest before we overwhelm you with politeness and introductions. But first, you should meet Gal.”

The prince beckoned with a jerk of his head to a figure standing in the shadow cast by the tall walls.

“This is Sir Galeon, head of my personal guard. And now yours,” Prince Valin said. “You may rely on her.”

As the knight moved into the sunlight, Della’s stomach dropped. Della had heard of the lady knights of Glea but had never seen one.

Sir Galeon’s armor was forged of the same white silver as the prince’s crown. The surface was embossed with delicate patterns, belying the brutality of its purpose. Plating covered her chest, shoulders, and forearms, highlighting her strapping build. Below the hem of her fine chainmail shirt, bleached leather encased sturdy thighs.

With her fair hair twisted back into a severe knot at the base of her head, she looked carved from the marble surrounding her—alluring yet untouchable. Della’s fingers instantly itched to touch. The only crack in the knight’s stony face was a deep scar that crossed from the bridge of her nose down to her jaw.

Della experienced the heat of the courtyard more acutely than the moment before.

Sir Galeon bent forward in a bow. “Princess.” Her voice was measured as she stared passively at a place over Della’s shoulder.

Della nodded quickly and returned her gaze to her betrothed. It was much safer there. No temptation lurked in the man at Della’s side.

Prince Valin led her into a large entrance chamber echoing with more harsh marble. The princess’s fancy shoes were too small for Della, and

they pinched her heels and toes painfully despite the cushion of plush runners of blush pinks and deep reds on the floor. The patter of feet and whispers followed, accompanied by the clanking of armor. Della hoped the lady knight would not be a frequent presence.

They traversed a long hall, which ended in a spiraling staircase. Through the narrow windows on the climb, Della caught glimpses of the chaotic rooftops of the city and the craggy mountains surrounding the valley beyond.

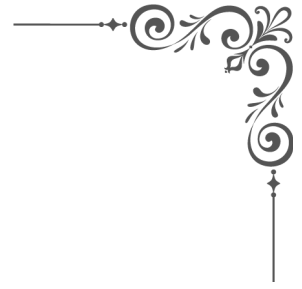
At the top sprawled a charming room that made up the entire upper floor of the tower.

“This will be yours. Until the wedding,” Prince Valin said.

A faint breeze drifted through the space, catching the gauzy curtains that framed the tall windows and shallow balcony. The oversized hearth was clean but stacked with wood, centering a stiffly elegant seating area of pink brocade furniture. Yet it was the wide, tempting bed which drew Della’s eye. It called to her weary body, and her neck twinged.

The trunks were shuffled in and placed neatly by the wardrobe, which stood open and waiting for her to start a life here.

Too bad it would be so short.



CHAPTER 2

THE PRICE OF A SECRET

A pale spider spindled up the wall, nearly invisible against the smooth green marble. Galeon watched its lurching progress from where she stood at the base of the tower steps.

Beyond the window, the sun had already set. Braziers alight with flame lined the hall, preparing to be useful as the orange light faded to purple.

Finally, soft footsteps announced the princess.

As when they had met earlier, Galeon only allowed herself a glance at the princess's face, long enough to determine she was harshly lovely, her features sharp and arresting.

She wore a gown of rich Hevalon blue laced tightly against her torso, the sleeves revealing smooth shoulders before flowing long like the skirts. The material hugged her figure in a manner that made Galeon's blood heat inconveniently.

Galeon stepped back to allow her plenty of room. The princess tilted her chin up more than necessary to look down her long nose at Galeon, though Galeon was still slightly taller.

"Prince Valin is in the dining hall. Are you ready to join him?" Galeon kept her gaze fixed on the wall near the princess's ear.

After a longer than natural pause, the princess assented coolly.

Galeon led the way, making sure to match her strides to the princess, who walked strangely, as if trying to avoid putting weight on her feet. Galeon slowed more.

"Does your prince often have you running errands like this?" the princess asked.

"I would not consider this an errand, but my purpose."

The princess hummed, and Galeon could not tell what the sound meant. "Surely there are more important things for a knight to be doing."

"I cannot think of any, Princess."

She hummed again, but this time it sounded decidedly displeased.
“And I need a guard to go to dinner?”

“The prince thinks it is best. And I agree.”

They walked on in silence.

“Does my presence upset you?” Galeon asked, keeping her eyes scanning their surroundings and carefully off the woman at her side. “Or perhaps you would prefer a different guard?”

Galeon knew she was unusual, especially to the other kingdoms. She wasn’t the only one by far, but she did stand out, even in Glea. Was the princess already prejudiced against her because Galeon was a woman? It wouldn’t have been the first time.

The princess did not reply, just held her chin high. She was quite haughty. As she had every reason to be.

Prince Valin stood when they entered the dining hall. He smiled charmingly, but Galeon noted the nervous twitch of his fingers as he twirled his ring. When he looked at Galeon, she nodded at him in support.

Galeon withdrew, standing beside Sir Alvor in her usual spot at the side of the room, out of the way yet with easy sight to all entrances.

“How are things going?” Galeon murmured.

“As expected.” Sir Alvor’s smile was wry. “I think he misses you already. Your patience goes underappreciated. It shall be sung of through the ages.”

Galeon brushed off the comment. She half listened to the royal pair make polite, stilted conversation over their food. The other half of her tried not to notice how the princess’s hair shone in the candlelight, or the indent the top of her gown left in her gently rounded shoulder.

“I’m afraid I’m overly busy right now with my mother away,” Prince Valin said. “As her eldest and favorite child, I am heir and regent, of course.”

“I thought you were her only child,” the princess said.

“I am also that.” Prince Valin winked. “She sends her regards, though she will likely not be back in time for the wedding.”

Galeon wondered which lover the queen was with. It was a widely known secret within the palace that the queen had a long list, and it spanned age and gender indiscriminately. The prince's own parentage had been questioned more than once, though no one argued that he was not the queen's natural child, and that was all that mattered, as it was her bloodline that carried the crown. Not even that truly mattered to Galeon. He was her prince, and always would be.

"I want you to feel at home here," Prince Valin said. "You may go anywhere you wish within the palace walls, so long as you bring Sir Galeon with you, or one of the guards she assigns."

The princess stiffened. "I need a guard everywhere?"

"These are still troubled times, as you know. And you are from Hevalon." Prince Valin's smile was somewhat strained. Hevalon and Glea had been dancing around full-out war for many years. Treaties had been signed and re-signed, but the animosity lingered, and the fighting had never truly stopped. "I can assure you most of our people are happy you are here, as they should be. But we won't take any chances. Gal will keep you safe." Prince Valin glanced over at Galeon, and she nodded again.

"Very well," the princess conceded after a tense moment. "I do understand. Our engagement is a symbol, after all. It would be a shame if anything happened to me."

Prince Valin smiled as if oblivious to his bride's displeasure. And perhaps he was.

Galeon wondered if the princess was resentful. The engagement had been rather sudden. Galeon also knew what it was like to be uprooted from her life and thrust into this one, though through a very different context.

"I am tired from my journey. I would like to return to my room," the princess said pointedly.

"Yes, of course."

Galeon took her cue and proceeded the princess out the door and back the way they had come.

Again, Galeon measured her steps as the princess limped lightly.

"Are you in pain? May I offer you any assistance?" Galeon asked.

“No.” But after a few moments, the princess stopped walking and toed off her slippers.

Galeon glimpsed her bare feet, and the angry red marks on her heels and instep where the material had been cutting into her flesh. Galeon frowned as the princess stooped and picked up the offending slippers before Galeon could do it for her, hurrying onward. Galeon matched her once more. Why would her shoes be too small for her?

The princess carried herself proudly, her pointed chin tilted, as if stuck in that position from holding her nose in the air.

“Do you require anything, Princess?” Galeon asked when they reached the steps up to the suite.

“No.”

Galeon would not be fazed. “Good night.”

Galeon did not think she would get a reply as the princess rounded the corner. “Good night, Sir Galeon.”



THE PALACE BENEATH Della had gone still. Despite her body’s exhaustion from traveling, she lay awake in the wonderfully soft bed.

She’d made the mistake of peeking into the next layer beyond life, and now the ghost she’d found there would not leave her alone. Unfortunately, when Della reached out to see them, they could see her too.

Della had not meant to look, but when she wasn’t paying attention and the magic called, sometimes she slipped up. She chastised herself. She had to do better.

The ghost was persistent, as were most who lingered. Even when Della anchored herself firmly in the living world, she could feel it itching inside her skull.

Della rolled and pulled the blanket over her head. When that didn’t work, she added a pillow. But some things she could not hide from. Some things she could not change, no matter how much she wished to.

Being a witch was a death sentence in all the kingdoms. This one was no different. Magic was a disease—one without a cure, and one without

forgiveness. Della thought of the knight, Sir Galeon. Would she be Della's executioner if she ever discovered Della's secret?

For centuries, mortal magic had been safely sealed away from this world, until some careless hero released it. It had spread through the lands, a green plague infecting the weak and seeping into bloodlines. Della had the great misfortune to be born from one.

Della refused to be weak. She refused to be consumed by the sickness or listen to its monstrous promises. She refused to become its monster.

The kingdoms had made a bloody effort to carve away the infection, though they had yet to succeed.

Della could rid herself of the gnawing power temporarily. But the magic always came back, trickling insidiously into her until she was driven to purge it again or face the consequences she had promised Annet they would never face.

Soulless green eyes flashed in Della's mind. Hands closing around her throat. The snap of bones.

Della pushed away those memories and the phantom pain she carried after so many years. With a sigh, she swung her legs over the side of the bed, letting her bare feet touch the plush rug, then cool marble floor. The swelter of the day had left a chill in its wake. She shivered in the thin nightgown as she grabbed a robe from the wardrobe.

"Fine, then," Della whispered.

The image of her room faded to a blurry background as the ghost came into clear focus. In the pale darkness of night, the worlds of the living and the dead looked most similar.

Ghosts did not retain the physical image of their mortal bodies. This one appeared to Della as a spectral, vaguely human-shaped form, which was gesturing wildly. Della tried to understand.

"Downstairs?" Della asked.

It would have been so much easier if they could speak.

Della could not hear ghosts, but she heard the magic. Whispering, not in words, but in want. Tempting. Lying.

Della would not listen.

Della's skin glowed faintly green as she used her magic. She was still in the living world but could peek into the thin layer of death that hung between life and whatever lay beyond.

She used to begrudge how her magic manifested. If she had to be infected, why couldn't she have had illusion magic, or divination? Even Annet's compulsion was useful. But Della had been cursed with the ability to interact with and manipulate death. To influence souls passing between the living and the dead, until they slipped into the darkness that even Della could no longer see. And, occasionally, to pass through herself.

On bare toes, Della started to descend the foggy stairs, dropping back into the living world so her glow would not be visible through the windows of the tower. Focused on not making any noise, she did not see the dark shape of a knight propped at the foot of the stairs until it was too late.

Della stumbled and collided with embossed armor and warm body, sprawling inelegantly forward.

Someone was on top of her, pinning her between marble floor and unyielding metal.

Sir Galeon pulled away immediately, and Della's heart thundered in her ears. The fall, the surprise, and the sensation of the large woman caging her in had Della's body thrumming in several ways.

"Princess." Sir Galeon stood, holding out her hands to help Della stand. "Forgive me. I did not hear you."

"And I didn't see you."

"What are you doing down here?"

It was a good question. One Della had no intention of answering. "I was thirsty," Della lied quickly.

The nearest braziers had burned out, and it was too dark to see Sir Galeon's expression clearly.

"I can bring you to the kitchens. Or you may take this." A slim silver flask caught the faint light as Sir Galeon offered it. Della hesitated, but

then accepted, curling her fingers around the cold container.

“You may keep it,” Sir Galeon said as Della just stood there, holding the untouched flask.

Della still felt the itching inside her skull, but she couldn’t respond to it. The ghost would have to wait, and Della would have to keep trying to sleep despite it.

Frustrated by both her carelessness and the situation, and with no other option that would not raise more suspicion, Della retreated back up the steps.



GALEON’S STOMACH RUMBLED in appreciation as she smelled the food before she saw the two women round the corner and approach along the hallway.

“For you,” the shorter one said, smiling as she pressed the tray of breakfast into Galeon’s hands.

“Thanks, Viv.”

“Of course.” Viv was still smiling. “So, you are in charge of the princess?”

“Not in charge.”

Viv giggled and stepped closer. “Is she as pretty as everyone says?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Galeon did not take the bait, though it likely didn’t matter. Gossip spread like wildfire in the palace.

“Prettier than me?” Viv batted her eyelashes.

Viv’s older companion sighed. “That ship has sailed, girl. Leave the poor knight alone.”

A few times, Galeon had nearly accepted one of Viv’s offers of a quick fumble in a storage room. In moments of weakness, when the light caught Viv’s honey-colored hair and turned it a hue of red so very much like Lillian’s had been.

Old pain smoldered. That was not a path Galeon was willing to walk again. Ever.

Viv was watching Galeon with desire written on her face and Galeon admired how Viv wore her intentions plainly, not caring who might see. Before Galeon had the title of Sir attached to her name, no one cared who she loved or married or hid in storage rooms with either. Now, Galeon would be expected to seek the permission of the queen or prince to openly court and wed. Not that she would ever need it.

Galeon liked Viv and didn't want to lead her on. Viv, however, seemed to very much want to follow.

Thankfully, the lure of meeting the new princess was too much to resist and Viv disappeared up the stairs, leaving Galeon to her breakfast. As Galeon wolfed it down, dry bread lodged in her throat and she had difficulty swallowing past it. She reached for her flask on reflex, but it was missing.

The princess was nothing like Lillian.

Galeon banished that thought, choked down the bread, and rolled her shoulders out. Her back ached. She was getting a bit old for the floor. The arrogance of youth faltered in the face of a night on hard stone.

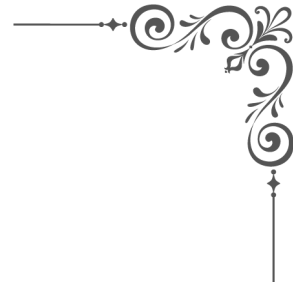
"She's even prettier," Viv said in a conspiratorial tone, emerging from the stairwell and taking Galeon's empty tray back. "In an austere way."

"And she is engaged to our prince," Galeon reminded her firmly.

Viv shrugged carelessly and turned away.

"Viv," Galeon called after her. "I have a favor to ask."

Viv raised her eyebrows suggestively, but she agreed. Galeon hoped it would not come with a price she wasn't willing to pay.



CHAPTER 3

A SURPRISE IN THE LIBRARY

Della rubbed at the exhaustion under her eyes. She had not slept much due to the ghost tugging at her all night, and had barely tasted her breakfast.

“Do you think I will scandalize the whole palace?” Della asked as Annet helped lace up a green silk gown. It clung indecently to Della’s body, which was a bit fuller than the one the gown had been made for.

Annet smirked. “Perhaps. Would that be such a bad thing?”

“I suppose not.” Della considered herself in the mirror, and then she shrugged. She would pretend it was intentional. Her version of Princess Cordelia was a scandalous dresser, apparently. “What are your plans for today?” Della asked Annet.

“The young cook has already offered to show me around.”

“Good. You should try to make as many friends as you can. We don’t have long.”

Annet rolled her eyes. “Yes, I know. *Princess.*”

“Shh,” Della scolded, glancing at the door before giving Annet a quick hug. “Be careful.”

“I always am.”

Della let Annet leave first, and then she crammed her feet into a pair of open-back slippers. Her heels hung off the ends, but her skin was too tender from yesterday to face a more enclosed option.

Sir Galeon waited for her at the base of the stairs again. This morning, however, the knight did not pin Della against anything. Pity.

No, not pity. Della gave herself a stern shake to dislodge the unacceptable spark of attraction.

Della handed Sir Galeon her flask back. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

The morning highlighted the raised scar on Sir Galeon's face. Della wondered what had happened to create it. Then the obnoxious scratching in Della's skull reminded her of her mission, which had nothing to do with wondering about scars on lady knights.

"I would like to explore the palace," Della said.

"As you wish."

Della needed to see the ghost again, but Sir Galeon was watching Della. Or rather, Sir Galeon was watching Della's ear. Della made sure they were alone, and then sidled toward the window and into the direct sunlight.

"This is a lovely view," Della commented. "What is that?" She pointed at nothing in particular.

As she hoped, Sir Galeon stepped up beside her and looked out. "What is your question, Princess?"

With the knight's head turned away, Della flashed into the next realm, relying on the sun to hide her glow. She saw the ghost disappear down an adjoining hallway as Della dropped back into the living world.

"Never mind," she said breezily.

Her shoes managed to both pinch and threaten to fall off at once as she rounded the corner. The new hall rippled with alcoves and doorways leading off on the right. The left wall was partially open, overlooking an inner sunken courtyard. Wispy trees rustled in the breeze and reached lazily toward her. As Della walked, she purposefully kicked off one of her slippers.

"Oops." Della turned back and blinked at her discarded shoe in pretend surprise.

Sir Galeon stooped to retrieve it for her. Della flashed again and saw the ghost at the end of the hall, near the last door.

When Sir Galeon knelt and placed the slipper in front of Della, Della shoved aside the guilt. Some things were more important than being kind. She had learned that the hard way.

Della reluctantly slipped her foot back into the uncomfortable thing and hobbled to the door where she had seen the ghost.

Narrow windows reached from parquet floors to vaulted ceilings, casting the room in shafting light. Colorful shelves lined the walls and vignettes of seating areas littered the cavernous room. As Della moved inside, there did not appear to be any other entrances or anyone present. Had she gone through the wrong door?

“You are welcome to take any books you wish,” Sir Galeon said.

“Oh. Yes, good.” Unexpected embarrassment wound around Della’s gut. She had never learned to read. But she could not admit that. Princesses were literate. And she needed an excuse to linger.

Della walked over to the opposite window, which overlooked the top of a stunning garden. Paths of marble and gravel weaving past ponds and streams peeked through the canopy of lush green extending down to the lower palace walls keeping the River Glea out.

“What sort of reading do you enjoy?” Sir Galeon asked. “I may be able to help point you in a direction.”

The library smelled of aged leather and paper. The books looked down on Della from tall shelves as if disapproving of her presence, sensing her as the imposter she was.

Sir Galeon was watching her ear expectantly again.

“Do you recommend anything?” Della asked instead of answering the question.

“There are histories here.” Sir Galeon walked over to one wall. “Collections of fine poetry and illustrations here.”

“Illustrations?” Della clasped onto that description.

Sir Galeon nodded and ran her hand along a shelf, withdrawing several large books. This was a space she was clearly comfortable in, and Della’s ball of embarrassment grew. She ignored it, taking the opportunity to look for the ghost. It took her a moment to find it, high on a balcony that ran around the upper portion of the soaring room.

The books Sir Galeon handed Della were surprisingly heavy, the top one bound in a shimmering scaled hide. Della rested the stack on a side table and curiously opened the first cover.

The pages seemed terribly fragile as she turned them inexpertly. A few showed indecipherable scribbles of text, but most sprang to life with elegant illustrations, some illuminated in color and gold, and others only black ink but equally lovely. Della flipped through images of landscapes, plants, and animals, peoples and creatures, some Della had seen and many she had not.

As Della stared at the captivating scenes, she temporarily forgot about the ghost. Then she pushed the excitement aside too, returning her attention to the upper floor.

Della approached the steep staircase, which was more of a ladder. She got two rungs up before she kicked off her ill-fitting slippers so they couldn't murder her on the climb. She bunched the slippery fabric of her skirt in her hand, holding it close to her body.

The second-floor ceilings were sloping and closer to them, creating a cozier space. A walkway ran all around the room, the wood smooth and warm against the soles of Della's bare feet.

"What is up here?" Della asked Sir Galeon to distract the woman as Della looked around.

"Novels, mostly."

"Do you enjoy novels, Sir Galeon?"

"I do."

"Tales of heroes and battles and lovers?"

"As long as they have a happy ending."

Della paused and raised her eyebrows, not expecting that answer. "You are a romantic?"

"If you say so, Princess."

"But tragedies can be terribly romantic too, can't they?"

"Not in my experience. Princess."

A chill ran through Della. Sir Galeon's polite features had turned remote. Della had touched on something she shouldn't.

She turned and started walking along the narrow path, keeping her hand on the dark wood railing.

"Do you have any favorite happy stories up here?" Della asked, hoping to break the stiff tension in her gently clanking companion.

As Sir Galeon showed her to an alcove, Della fell back.

The ghost was pointing toward a burgundy spine on an upper shelf. Della frowned but didn't have time to look more closely.

"This one I enjoyed recently," Sir Galeon said, handing over a green-bound tome. "Quite romantic, as you say. My favorite novel is not here, as the prince gifted me the collection's copy. It's in my room. But I can bring it to you if you wish."

"No need. I will start with this one." Della forced a smile and walked casually onward, pretending to inspect the titles on the shelves. She spotted the burgundy one and stood on her toes to reach it. It didn't move. Della tried again and lost her balance.

Then Della tumbled forward as the section of the bookshelf swung inward.

The first thing Della noticed was that she did not hit the floor. The second thing she noticed was the distinctive scent of death. She breathed it in for a moment as her eyes adjusted.

Before Della could get a better look, Sir Galeon hauled her upright and spun her away, wrapping Della behind her body.

"Let me see," Della protested, peering over the distractingly broad shoulder in front of her. Sir Galeon's left hand curled back and gripped Della's waist, the other already holding her unsheathed sword. Della tried to ignore the feeling of her touch. "She's already very dead, and not a threat. Stand aside, Sir Galeon."

The knight hesitated another moment, but then reluctantly released her. They both leaned forward to inspect the secret room.

The cramped space, only a few paces from side to side, was occupied mostly by the decomposing corpse. It wore a gown of butter-yellow silk, the remaining blonde hair matted with solidified blood. The scent, formerly sealed away, was now overwhelming.

“Let’s go,” Sir Galeon said, her voice and hand firm on the small of Della’s back.

Della sighed in silent relief and did not protest as Sir Galeon guided her toward the steep steps.

The itching was gone.



GALEON STOOD WITH SIR Lamora, head of the palace guard, observing as they carefully collected and removed the corpse from the library. The face was unrecognizable and based on the wounds, the victim appeared to have suffered a great fall. Since it was found on the upper floor, the body would have been carried back up the steps before being interred in the wall. Which meant it was deliberate and not an accidental tragedy of someone who trapped themselves. And fresh enough to be concerning.

The sight of the grisly discovery didn’t stir much in Galeon, and that disturbed her. Was this what she had become? Had the things she’d seen and done made her unmoved in the face of such a violent death? She shrugged her disquiet away. She had done her duty for her prince and for her kingdom. And she would continue to do so.

“Gal?”

Galeon leaned over the railing. “Here, Your Highness.”

As Prince Valin stared up at her, something odd flitted through his expression.

“Tell me what happened,” the prince demanded as he joined them on the second level. “How did you find this?”

“The princess did.”

“What?” Prince Valin stepped forward sharply.

“She was exploring the collection and pulled that book. It appears to be a lever,” Galeon explained calmly, indicating.

Prince Valin's jaw worked as he clenched and unclenched his fists, his ring twirling. "What did she see? What did she say?"

"The princess, Your Highness?"

"Yes, the princess, Gal," Prince Valin snapped.

"She faced it well. Did not seem as distressed as many might."

"Where is she now?"

"In her room. Sir Betier and Sir Daric are on the stairs."

At the thought, Galeon was eager to get back to her post. The knights were two of her best, which was why Galeon had assigned them, but she would feel better being the one to watch her.

The prince's jaw twitched as he glared at a small imperfection on the wood of the railing at Galeon's side.

"Are you well, Your Highness?" Galeon asked, concerned for her agitated prince.

"I just..." He glanced briefly at the secret room as he turned away, covering his nose at the lingering scent that had not dissipated yet, despite the current scrubbing and opened windows. "Get it cleaned up," he ordered Sir Lamora harshly as he left.

"I will let you know what else we learn," Sir Lamora assured Galeon.

Galeon clasped the older woman's hand before heading back down the steps. She paused, collecting the illustrated books from the end table, before returning to her post.

Galeon's heart and feet echoed particularly loudly as she climbed the tower. She reminded herself it was not intruding. She had promised to inform the princess of what they found in exchange for her agreeing to stay in her room.

The door was slightly ajar. Galeon knocked lightly on the stone arch before peering inside when she heard no answer.

The princess was elegant even as she lay flopped over the covers of her bed, one arm stretching across the mattress, the other curled beneath her head as she slept.

Galeon knew she shouldn't stare. She shouldn't notice how the tops of breasts curved and spilled above a neckline, rising and falling with each breath. She shouldn't follow the long line of hip and thigh outlined in thin green silk, or wonder about bared, bruised toes.

Galeon should leave. She was slightly ashamed of how long it took her to turn away, her foot landing on the top step.

"Sir Galeon?" The princess pushed herself up, stretching catlike. Then she winced and rubbed the back of her neck before letting her hand fall quickly. "What did you learn?"

"I did not intend to wake you. I can return."

"No, it's fine. Come in."

The princess stood and moved over to the formal seating area near the hearth. Galeon hesitated, and then joined her, placing the books on the ornately carved table between them.

"Well?" the princess prompted.

"We don't know much yet. The physician will be able to say more with an examination, but we estimate she was killed a month or so back."

"Killed?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Her gown was fine."

"It was," Galeon agreed, uneasiness in her gut. A fine gown meant she was likely a noble. Or at least wealthy. And wealthy people drew wealthy interest. How could she have gone missing for so long? "I am sorry you had to see that."

The princess shrugged. "Why? Should I have fainted? Sorry to disappoint."

Galeon was not disappointed, though she had not honestly expected the haughty princess to be so calm in the face of such a thing. But she seemed remarkably unaffected.

Galeon stood. "If there is nothing else, Princess."

When Galeon reached the door, the princess spoke. "Thank you for the books."

The words did not mean anything. They had no reason to affect Galeon's heart rate.

She bowed, and then walked down the stairs.



DELLA RAN THE BRUSH through her hair as Annet sat beside her on the overly large bed.

"So the ghost is gone?" Annet asked.

"It seems she simply wanted to be found."

"That was reckless."

Della glared because she knew Annet was right. "It was necessary. She would never have left me alone if I didn't help her. Anyway, it worked. Tell me about your day. How did things go with the cook?"

"He seems nice enough. Gorgeous as well, which is convenient."

Della raised her eyebrows. "And why would that matter?"

"I might seduce him."

"Do you think that would help our cause?"

"Not at all. But it would be fun."

Della returned her sister's smirk. "Well, have fun, then. Just don't let it mess up our plans."

Annet threw an irritated look at Della. "I'm not the one using magic in a knight's presence."

Della tossed aside her brush and pulled her sister in for a hug. "I'm sorry, Netty. It won't happen again."

Annet hugged her back for a moment. Then she scooted off the bed. "I'll leave you to your beauty sleep and try to get some of my own."

"Are you comfortable in your room?"

"It's not quite as grand as this—" Annet gestured around the opulent space. "—but it is private and has a bed, and the one rat I found is quite friendly. So I am happy."

"Well, let me know if you need anything."

"I'm the maid, not you, remember? But thanks anyway."

“Good luck with your cook.”

Annet blew her a kiss over her shoulder.

Della put away the discarded hairbrush and was about to climb into the welcoming bed when a soft knock had her turning back to the doorway.

One of the servants who had brought her breakfast entered, carrying a tray draped with cloth.

“What is this?” Della asked.

“Something from the kitchens to make your evening more comfortable, Princess.” She placed the tray on Della’s bedside table before folding back the cloth to reveal several rounded pitchers. “Will you need anything else this evening?”

The young woman smiled at Della in a way that Della recognized. Perhaps if things were different, Della would have been interested. She was petite, curvy, and bold, which were all qualities Della appreciated in a bed partner. But not here. Such things got messy, and Della would not allow anything to mess up her plans.

She raised her chin and returned the questioning gaze with a cold one. “No. You may go.”

The woman left quickly.

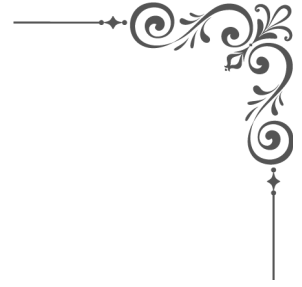
Della investigated the pitchers. She identified chilled water, sweet wine, and fresh juice. How entirely unnecessary.

Sir Galeon must have had them sent to her. It was a simple thing, surely meant to keep her from trying to wander around the palace at night.

Della was a princess, and they were drinks. They didn’t mean anything. Della glared at them.

It would be a shame to leave good wine out undrunk all night.

Della begrudgingly poured herself a shallow goblet. Then she reached for the stack of priceless books.



CHAPTER 4

THE TROUBLE WITH SHOES

Della let the tart fruit burst with flavor in her mouth. The tree curling over Prince Valin's balcony provided welcome shade in the height of the afternoon. An undulating mosaic of mismatched rooftops sprawled beyond the palace walls as the calls and rumble of life drifted charmingly to them.

Prince Valin smiled at Della over the top of his cup, and Della reminded her face to smile back.

After the excitement of discovering the corpse in the library nearly a week ago, life as a princess had been rather dull. Della had spent most of her time in her room poring over the illustrated books. The dullness of her current situation did not bother her. It was a rather delightful change. She was comfortable, pampered, and relatively safe, and had known too many other realities not to appreciate that. But to her great annoyance, a restlessness persisted, her body not fully able to relax into it.

Della's skin pricked with the sensation of eyes on her. She glanced over at where Sir Galeon stood by the open doors, but the knight's gaze was carefully averted as always.

Della tried not to let Sir Galeon's presence impact her, but the knight was too formidable and too attractive to ignore effectively. Sir Galeon really was stunning in her armor. Della knew she'd be stunning without the armor too.

And that was one of the many reasons Della should stay far away from the woman who made her fingers itch.

"I want to apologize again, Princess Cordelia, for the gruesome discovery in our palace," Prince Valin said. "I hope you do not feel unsafe here."

"Death is inevitable everywhere. I would be shocked more if there were none."

Prince Valin waved off her comment as if not really listening to what she said. “I don’t want you to worry.”

“I’m not worried. I have Sir Galeon to protect me.” Della threw a glance back at the knight, whose gaze flicked away as she inclined her head.

Prince Valin nodded. “It is particularly important that you don’t leave your room without Gal or someone she assigns for you.”

Annoyance flared in Della. She resented being followed everywhere. Even by a pretty knight. But princesses were supposed to be obedient. What a shame. Della would strive for compliant, at least.

Della shifted and adjusted her purple velvet bodice, far too hot and restrictive for the day. Prince Valin’s eyes followed her movements, and Della silently cursed the ill-fitting garment. She had to make do with what the real princess had packed. The gowns, Della could work with, but the shoes were painful. She was glad of the respite now as she was able to slip them off and hide her feet beneath her skirt as they sat at the table and enjoyed their meal.

“Have you learned who she was?” Della prompted.

“Who?” The prince bit into another fruit.

“The woman in the library.”

“Don’t trouble yourself with it. You should put it out of your mind. In fact, I insist.” Prince Valin stood. “Unfortunately, I am required inside this afternoon. They call me the Warrior Prince, not the Statesman. I find I am less comfortable in the hall than a camp. Being regent is a good taste of what life will be one day, though I wish it were better timed. I don’t want you to think I am ignoring you.”

“I do not think you are,” Della said, regretfully slipping her shoes back on and standing with him.

“Will you join me on a tour of the gardens tomorrow morning?”

“I look forward to it.” Della did indeed look forward to exploring the gardens she had been eyeing from her windows.

“If you need anything, just ask and it is yours. My bride will have everything she wants.”

Della considered her fiancé. He really was very handsome. Not that she was moved by handsome men. “Are you trying to buy my affection?”

“Perhaps a bit. Will it work?”

“We will have to see.”

Prince Valin watched her, as if trying to discern if she was serious. She kept her expression neutral, and after an awkward moment, he took her hand and bent over it, brushing his lips against her skin. The feeling left Della cold. She didn’t dislike him, as much as she didn’t particularly like him. But that was not what this arrangement was about, and was just as well.

Della limped her way back to her tower with Sir Galeon at her side. Sir Galeon did not leave Della feeling cold. Della wished she did.

“Well, *have* you learned anything more about the corpse?” Della asked as they walked.

“We have not.”

“No reported missing women?”

“Not of her description.”

“Isn’t that strange?”

Sir Galeon glanced toward her, and then quickly away.

Della frowned. “What aren’t you saying?”

“What would you like me to say?”

Della stopped walking. “There isn’t going to be an investigation, is there.” The food in her stomach soured.

Sir Galeon stopped too. “The prince wishes to keep it quiet. It is a delicate matter.”

It was an embarrassing matter. Having an unknown body turn up in the palace wasn’t a good look.

“And you agree?” Della asked.

Sir Galeon's expression was carefully blank. "It is not my decision. But I understand it."

Della thought she understood it too, and it didn't sit well with her. Della had done what she could, and the soul had passed. But it felt unfinished. Perhaps Della should let it go as the prince said.

Della was out of sorts as she left Sir Galeon at the base of her steps and climbed up to her room. She kicked off her odious shoes and flopped on the bed, staring up at the draped canopy above her. The restlessness returned and she rolled, reaching for one of the books to occupy herself until Annet visited later.

Her eyes moved past the table and landed on an unfamiliar trunk beside her wardrobe. She was almost certain it had not been in her room when she had left that morning. Della knelt in front of it and opened the lid.

Packed between layers of white satin lay a dozen pairs of new shoes, one for each unbearable set she had brought with her, including a decent duplicate of the impractical gold slippers encrusted with dragon scale fragments. Della picked up a simpler leather pair and tried them on. They fit perfectly.

She slammed the lid of the trunk and ran very unprincessly down the stairs, where she nearly collided with Sir Galeon. Again.

"What did you do? Who did you tell?"

Sir Galeon frowned. "Princess?"

"Why are there new shoes in my room?" Della accused.

"They are from the prince."

"And why would the prince send me shoes?"

"Because your others do not fit you."

"Did you tell him that?" Della hissed, anger and alarm welling in her chest.

"No, I just asked if I could arrange a few new ones made for you. That is all."

Della stared at Sir Galeon, but she did not detect any deceit in her. A sliver of Della's unease loosened.

"Please forgive me if I offended you. That was not my intent," Sir Galeon said.

"I am not offended," Della replied quietly. "My feet must have...swollen."

"Travel and heat can do that."

Again, Della found only sincerity in Sir Galeon's face, not suspicion. Della was a princess. She was the future queen. They were only shoes. It had been a very thoughtful thing to do.

No one gave Della gifts. She was close to no one. She trusted no one. Especially not knights.

"Thank you," Della said a bit belatedly.

"They are from the prince."

Della doubted the prince even knew about their existence. No, these were a gift from Sir Galeon. And Della should not have liked that as much as she did.



GALEON STOOD BESIDE the princess near the terrace doors in the empty ballroom. The hard, polished floors and tall ceilings reflected the light and few small sounds in the grand space, yet as the sun crept higher, the prince's wing of the palace remained suspiciously quiet. He had promised the princess a morning walk in the gardens, but the morning was wearing.

Galeon tried not to stare at the way the green gown clung to the princess's curves in silky invitation. It was the same one the princess had worn in the library. It was Galeon's favorite gown. Not that she should have a favorite.

The sound of someone approaching pulled Galeon's gaze away from the sun-catching jewel dangling delicately from an earlobe.

Instead of the prince, his newest manservant appeared. He was a young man whose beard was trying valiantly despite his youth.

“Sir Galeon,” he murmured with a nervous bow and glance toward the princess.

“Where is the prince?” Galeon asked, her senses alert at once.

“He won’t be able to make it.” He spoke in a hush as if to shield his voice from the princess, but she had easily heard him. “He told me to send his apologies and ask that Sir Galeon show the princess about in his stead.”

Galeon could imagine the mood the prince must be in and felt a bit sorry for the young man. “What is your name, again?” Galeon asked.

“Ollie, sir.” His ears turned pink. “Well, it is now. His Highness said it would be easier to remember.”

Galeon thanked the newest Ollie, and then turned to the princess. “Would you still like to see the gardens, or wait for another day?”

The princess’s gaze fell to the bright windows. “I would like to see them today.”

Galeon nodded. If she was escorting the princess in the prince’s stead, she would do it properly. Galeon offered her arm.

After a moment, the princess placed her hand in the crook of Galeon’s elbow. Though Galeon could not feel it through the chainmail that covered her there, the sight and pressure sent a thrill through her. She tried to ignore it as they walked out the doors.

The ballroom opened onto a terrace that cascaded into the gently sloping gardens. They moved down the wide steps, the railings slowly overtaken by a sprawl of greenery. A waterfall flowed down the center, creating two aisles into the gardens below and washing away the sounds of the city beyond, creating an illusion of intimacy. The overnight rain had left the air humid and fragrant.

“The prince is very pleased you are here,” Galeon said, feeling the need to reassure her.

The princess raised her eyebrows. “As evidenced by his absence.”

“He is very busy.”

“Yes, I know. Still, let’s not pretend either of us actually chose this.”

Galeon was not sure what to say to that, so she settled on repeating her message. “The prince wants you to be happy.”

The princess just hummed.

“Queen Mayve, the current queen’s great-great-grandmother, started this grove,” Galeon explained as they reached the base of the steps. “A tree is planted for each royal birth. That one was planted for Prince Valin.” Galeon indicated a sturdy tree near the edge of the grove.

The princess eyed the tree, then Galeon. “You and the prince are quite close.”

The comment made Galeon squirm, along with the implication it generally accompanied. “I would not say that, Princess.”

“He calls you ‘Gal.’”

“He does.”

“And that doesn’t make you close?”

“He finds it amusing, and I do not mind. I have served him for ten years and am fiercely honored by his trust. But I could never dare consider us more than what we are—a prince and his knight.”

They walked on, past the grove of ancestry and along a gravel path, beneath an arch of winding vines budding with soft pink.

Galeon should say something. The prince was good at conversation. Galeon floundered around in her mind for a moment. “How do these compare to the gardens of your former home? I imagine the Palace of Hevalon has lovely ones.”

“I think I prefer these.” Unfortunately, the princess was not so easily redirected from topics Galeon did not want to discuss. “Did you grow up in a noble house?”

“No. I was a blacksmith.”

Galeon chanced a glance at her, unsure if that information would change her desire to be out here. The princess looked surprised but the grip on Galeon’s arm did not change.

“How does a blacksmith wind up being called ‘Gal’ by a prince?”

Galeon's insides twisted. She really didn't want to go there. "I impressed him. My old home was near the Uvarian border during the war. Until it burned. There was an attack, and I was fighting them when the prince and his army arrived. He offered me a chance to prove myself again, and I took it. I fought in his war, and he made me a knight."

"You must have been young."

"Twenty."

Galeon did not want to revisit the past she had buried many times over, but which haunted her from the grave. The pain had become more bearable with the years, but sometimes it still managed to take her breath away and send her to her knees. Galeon needed her knees to be strong, and she strode determinedly onward.

"These trees were imported," Galeon said, desperate to talk about something else. She reached up and plucked one of the warm, ripe fruits and offered it to the princess.

Galeon grew thoroughly entranced by the princess's mouth as she bit through the tender skin of the purple fruit, a beading droplet of juice clinging to her lips. Galeon briefly leaned into the intoxicating sight. The rich sensation that rushed through her blood was a much more pleasant thing to focus on, but she couldn't let it linger either. She looked away.

"Have you had a chance to read your books yet?" Galeon asked as they walked on. The patter of a fountain, croaking frogs, and twittering birds wove a peacefulness in this corner of the gardens.

"I have enjoyed the illustrations very much."

"Which volume?"

"Um...all of them." The princess's demeanor turned frosty again, and Galeon tried not to frown.

Galeon wanted to ask about the novel. For some reason, she needed the princess to like it. Would she judge Galeon if not? Think Galeon had poor taste? Galeon tried to shrug that off. It didn't matter what the princess thought of Galeon's taste in books. Yet, somehow, it did.

The sun climbed high in the sky, beating down on them. Sweat rolled along Galeon's back as, even in the shade, her armor cooked her. She

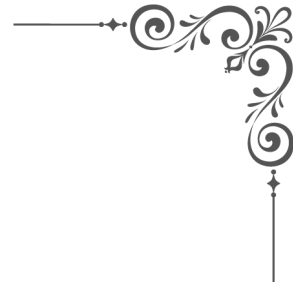
didn't mind, though. She had a beautiful woman on her arm.

Galeon led the princess through a wooded path around the side of the palace that would finish their tour in the front courtyard. The princess had walked easily all morning with no complaints or limping. The toes of her new shoes peeked out from beneath her skirts and Galeon stood a bit taller.

"Where to now, Princess?" Galeon asked as they passed beneath the purposefully overgrown archway and into the light of the courtyard.

"Would you like to explore more of the palace?"

The princess opened her mouth, but whatever she was about to say faded, along with the color in her face as they both heard the distinctive clanking of the cart.



CHAPTER 5

THE CAGE OF DUTY

Della stilled. The rumbling of the wheels matched the skittering on her skin. She turned her head, transfixed by the horror rolling into the courtyard and the four horses hauling the heavy cage.

Behind the lattice of iron lurked the malignant, a creature that had once been human. Its skin was mottled and scabbed and charred in places where people had tried to burn it. In the sockets where eyes had once been, a greenish glow poured out.

“What is that thing doing here?” Sir Galeon asked the driver sternly. “Take it to the lower entrance.”

“The bridge is out, sir. We have to take it around from inside.”

Della stared at the metal cage, recalling when a similar one had closed around her not long ago. And around Annet.

The malignant swiveled its head, snapping its unseeing green gaze on Della. Without warning, it shrieked and threw itself at the bars of the iron prison. Peeling fingers scrabbled, trying to get through the tight weave of metal that barely contained it.

Della saw Annet’s fingers poking through her cage in a darkened forest.

The whole cart rocked and the horses whinnied, one spooking and trying to shy away.

Della stood motionless as the malignant contorted and screamed. In the distorted features, Della searched pointlessly for familiarity she knew she would not find. Yet a tiny part of Della always wondered. Always looked.

Sir Galeon moved in front of Della, shielding her from the monster. No one could shield her from this.

Fear, disgust, and grief churned rapidly through Della. She knew there was no saving it. She knew from experience that if not for that cage, it would try to kill her without remorse, and likely would succeed. Still, Della didn’t want to think about what waited for it in the fires of the

dungeon. The furnace that was one of the few things hot enough to kill a creature such as this.

The malignant screamed and rocked the cart again as Sir Galeon hurried Della away, through the doors into the interior of the palace. Della went on numb feet.

That was the fate that awaited her.

That was what people saw when they learned Della was a witch.

That was what the infection of magic did.

“Sorry you had to see that, Princess.”

Della didn’t reply. She couldn’t.

“Would you like to return to your room?” Sir Galeon asked.

Della was shaken more than was reasonable. She leaned heavily on Sir Galeon’s arm, the sun-heated metal still too cold against her skin.

The echoes of screams followed. Della wasn’t sure if they were audible to anyone else, or just ringing in her own head, alongside the memories of peeling hands. Of bone snapping.

She couldn’t even say goodbye to Sir Galeon or give a proper thank-you. Her mouth filled with ash, then bile. The phantom pain in her neck had returned.

Sir Galeon said something as Della fled from her up the stairs. Della went straight to her bed and climbed in, pulling the covers over her head like she had done as a child, trying to hide from the ghosts and terrors and future that plagued her.

She was usually strong. She was usually brave. But sometimes, when faced with the thing she feared most in the world, she needed to hide.

Della remained there until Annet’s quiet knock made her peek past the impractical lace edging of the blanket.

Annet didn’t have to ask what was wrong. The worry and understanding on her face told Della Annet already knew.

“Is it gone?” Della asked, reaching out for Annet, needing to feel her.

“It is.”

Della swallowed, relieved and unsettled knowing the thing was destroyed. “How are you?” Della sat up a bit straighter, assessing her sister.

“Fine. I didn’t see it, just heard about it.” Annet looked down and rubbed her fingers over the backs of Della’s hands. “Sir Galeon sent for me. She said it frightened you.”

“It nearly broke the cart,” Della whispered and Annet’s fingers tightened. Annet met Della’s gaze, and Della knew she was remembering too.

“That’s not going to be our fate,” Annet said. “You promised me that. Or don’t you remember?” The hard edge to Annet’s voice helped sharpen Della’s spine.

“And it won’t be,” Della agreed. “I still promise.”

Annet nodded as if the matter was settled. “They are going to bring you a meal soon. Will you eat with me?”



GALEON DUNKED HER HEAD in the basin, letting the water run down and cool her overheated skin. She’d stolen a few moments in her room to wash away the grime of sweat, but she didn’t want to take long. The princess had been upset by the malignant and, foolishly, Galeon wanted to be the one there if she needed anything.

That abomination had no right to be seen by anyone. Galeon wished malignants didn’t have to be brought to the palace to be put down.

Anger and a twinge of sorrow coursed through her at the memory of her old mentor. They were nearly home, after the war, looking forward to some hard-won peace, and hadn’t been expecting a different sort of enemy to be lurking in the forest near their camp.

Galeon had been too slow to stop it as his body was snapped by the malignant’s unnatural strength. Its green, unseeing, senseless eyes had met Galeon’s as she severed the monster’s head long enough to contain the pieces in metal. Metal would not kill it—only the hottest of fire could do that.

Galeon had relished watching it burn.

She finished cleaning up, making sure not to leave any water on the floor. Her room was not large but was well-appointed near the prince's own, and the narrow window overlooked a corner of the garden. Her own sliver of peace.

As Galeon dried off, she caught sight of herself. Only the mirror saw her like this now. Her body had changed much in the ten years since she'd lost everything.

Her mind flashed to the memory of another mirror. A tiny thing above a long-gone mantle. Lillian's face appeared over Galeon's shoulder, smiling as she dropped her chin and rested her head against Galeon's.

Galeon looked away, gripping her brush and roughly smoothing her hair back before twisting it into a tight knot. A clean linen shirt and fitted half kirtle went on beneath her still-damp chainmail, then her breastplate, shoulder pauldrons, and gauntlets. Galeon was proud each time she strapped on these pieces of metal that signified her purpose in life.

The sun was already down when she made it back to her post.

"Any updates?" Galeon asked the young Sir Daric, but he shook his head.

Galeon leaned against the arched entrance to the steps, watching the last of the light fade beyond the window. The calls of songbirds were replaced by the hum of insects as night fell and grew deeper. Galeon hunkered down to wait.

The maid from Hevalon, Annet, appeared from the tower after a while.

"How is the princess?" Galeon asked, telling herself she was only asking because it was her duty.

Annet paused and tilted her head. "A bit shaken, but she will be fine. It was good that you sent for me."

Galeon nodded her thanks, and Annet nodded back before hurrying down the hall and out of sight.

Galeon frowned after her. She had been expecting the prince to call on the princess too, but the evening had grown late. Galeon had made certain he was informed.

What was so pressing that it would take precedence over his future queen? Then she tried to banish the treacherous thought. The prince had many duties that were pressing. Galeon had no right to question that.

Tentative footsteps had Galeon's heart accelerating and her spine straightening.

The shadow of the princess appeared, pausing several steps from the bottom as if afraid to descend all the way. Galeon could not see her expression well, though her posture was drawn. Almost timid. It was very different from the haughty woman Galeon was growing used to. Galeon wanted to fix it.

"What do you need?" Galeon asked, hating how eager she was to do whatever the princess bade.

"I was wondering if you would..."

Galeon climbed the first step. "Anything," she promised recklessly.

"Read to me."

Galeon blinked blankly for a moment. "Read, Princess?"

"The happy-ending story."

"As you wish."

Galeon followed the princess up the steps, confused, but Galeon supposed the princess simply didn't want to be alone.

Galeon had promised her anything. If her princess needed her to read a story, then she would do so.

The room was lit with soft candlelight. Awareness swirled deep in Galeon's belly as she saw the princess was wearing a loose robe, her feet bare and hair braided casually over her shoulder. Galeon hesitantly followed her to the seating area near the hearth, and then her palms started to sweat when the princess picked up the green-bound book and held it out. Galeon would need another bath after this.

"Where shall I start?" Galeon asked, taking the seat farthest from the princess and cracking open the spine.

"The beginning."

Galeon shifted a candle a bit closer and cleared her throat, which was suddenly dry.

The sound of her own voice made her want to stop immediately. She was overly aware of the halting, awkward cadence of her words. She stumbled and had to retry a few, but the princess didn't say anything. After a while, the familiar story captivated Galeon enough to distract her from herself, and she got lost in the pages.

Galeon looked up after the first chapter, ready to go, but the faint smile on the princess's face had Galeon's heart thudding and her fingers turning the page.

At the end of the third chapter, the princess stood. Galeon's unexpected disappointment was quashed when the princess spoke. "Keep going." Galeon obediently returned her attention to the book but hadn't read more than a page before the princess stopped her again. "I can't hear you well. Bring the chair over."

The princess reclined in her bed, the covers tucked to her waist and the semi-sheer fabric of her nightgown leaving just enough to the imagination. Sudden heat flooded Galeon as her throat became a desert again.

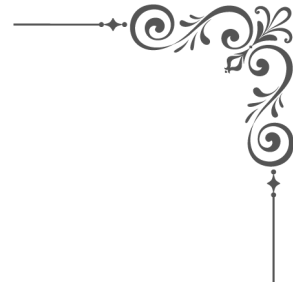
"It is growing late," Galeon said, not moving closer.

"And?"

"I am not sure this is entirely appropriate," Galeon tried.

"Just move the chair." The princess managed to sound both imperious and sleepy at the same time.

Galeon moved the chair. Then she read another chapter.



CHAPTER 6

FROM ASHES TO FLUFF

Della inspected her appearance in the mirror, pulling down several more tendrils of hair in the back to cover her neck. Annet had just pinned them up, telling her no one would notice, but Della noticed.

She was already late for a social evening with some local nobles, and she wasn't looking forward to it. She could admit she was perhaps procrastinating. Della leaned in, turning her head this way and that, making certain the dye in her hair was still holding.

Something large and heavy slammed into her window, and then let out a pitiful squawk. Della knew that cry, though she hadn't expected him to find her here. Della's knees knocked into her dressing table, rattling everything as she hurried to her balcony.

A hideous bird squatted sadly on the floor, blinking dazedly, his tattered crimson plumage streaked with icy blue.

Della sighed. "Again, Ferno? You molted just last year, didn't you?"

Ferno the phoenix looked balefully at her until Della crouched down and gathered his frail body into her arms. "Come inside, then."

The first time the phoenix had found Della was shortly after she developed her powers. She'd been horrified when he had burst into flames beneath her hands. But she soon realized his soul wasn't going anywhere—he just needed a little help. He sought her out when it was time for him to molt and be reborn.

"How did you find me?"

Ferno couldn't speak, but the look he gave Della let her know that was an uninspired question.

"Any chance you can hold on for a bit?" Della asked dubiously, eyeing the haggard bird. "Now is really not the best time for me."

Just as she uttered the words, he began to smoke.

Della dove for the hearth. She got close, only scorching a corner of the fine rug as Ferno erupted in flames. It was a quick, hot process, as his

wilting body was rapidly consumed, leaving a smoldering mound of black ash on the pristine marble floor.

A shimmering soul the color of blue-white flame hovered above the pile. Della knelt, lightly brushing away the soot to reveal the damp, lifeless chick body waiting.

“There you are,” Della coaxed the pearlescent droplet. “You can do it. I believe in you.”

Phoenixes were supposed to reattach to their new bodies by themselves. But for some reason, Ferno’s soul always got confused in this state. Della reached up and gave him a gentle nudge, her fingers glowing. As she used her magic to manipulate, the whispers grew louder. The magic called to her, but she ignored it.

The soul connected.

Tiny Ferno wheezed and squeaked as he wriggled, trying to get his unfamiliar feet beneath him. Della smiled. “Good boy.” She had watched this plenty of times by now, but he was adorable each time.

Then her smile faded as he began to shake. His frail young body needed warmth, but the sun had already set. Usually, Della would cuddle him or make him a nest near the fire for the night before he tottered off on his own. But the hearth was cold, and she was already late.

She bit her lip. He looked so sad. She couldn’t simply leave him.

“You’re lucky you’re so cute,” Della told him as she scooped him up.



GALEON DRUMMED HER fingers against the wall behind her as she waited. The princess should have been ready by now. Her maid, Annet, had left some time ago and the sun had set well before.

The prince would not be pleased. Galeon was debating how long to wait before checking on her, when she heard hurried footsteps. Galeon straightened, relieved at the sight of the princess, until she saw the dark streak on her face.

Galeon hesitated as the princess breezed past her. “Um, Princess...”

“Yes?”

“You have something on your cheek.”

The princess reached up and touched the wrong one, and Galeon noticed more black soot staining her nailbeds.

“Is everything all right?” Galeon asked, assessing her carefully. She appeared unharmed, but the closer Galeon looked, the more traces of soot she found. “Is there something wrong with your hearth?”

That was when Galeon noticed the faint waft of smoke.

The princess was on fire.

Galeon lunged, fully focused on removing the source of the danger as she plunged her hands into the folds of expensive skirts.

“Don’t hurt him!” the princess cried.

Forcing down the old, reactive fear that belonged ten years in the past, it took Galeon a moment to understand what she was clutching in her fist.

“Give him back!” the princess demanded, and Galeon was confused enough to release the tiny, struggling...thing.

The princess cradled it to her chest as she glared at Galeon like Galeon had just kicked a puppy. Galeon would never.

“What is that?” Galeon asked.

“What does it look like? A bird. And he doesn’t need your criticism or manhandling.”

Galeon stared as the princess cooed fondly at the ugliest bird Galeon had ever seen. Sparse dark feathers plastered its scrawny body, and bulbus red eyes blinked mournfully. It wheezed and let out another tiny puff of smoke from its black beak. It was unlike any bird Galeon had known.

“May I ask why you have a smoking bird in your pocket?”

“He’s just a baby. He needs warmth.”

“Oh. Right.” Galeon tried to recover herself. “I did not harm him, did I?”

“No, he should be fine.”

The princess gave the mostly bald head a gentle scratch, and then carefully tucked the bird back into her pocket.

“You are bringing him with you?” Galeon clarified, trying to figure out how to convey that was a terrible idea without saying it.

“Well, I can’t leave him alone.”

The princess glanced down and noticed what Galeon had already. Dark streaks of soot decorated her skirt and chest. It was less noticeable against the dark velvet, but stark against her skin. The princess sighed.

“Would you like to change?”

“Yes, but I’m already terribly late, aren’t I?”

“A bit.”

The princess wiped her hands on the cleaner half of her skirt and then brushed vigorously at her bosom. Galeon hastily looked away as she held out her handkerchief.

“Where is it on my face?” the princess asked. Galeon indicated on her own and the princess swiped. “Is it gone?”

“Not quite.”

“Will you?”

Galeon swallowed as she took the scrap of already discolored fabric back. She kept her focus on the smudge and gently rubbed it away from the fair skin, which pinkened slightly. “There.”

“Thanks.”

A strained moment passed. Then the princess turned and hurried down the hall. Galeon followed, confused but determined not to be rattled, and already failing.

When they entered the solarium, alight with candles and polite chatter, Prince Valin immediately noticed. As he approached, he gave Galeon a hard look and then turned a charming smile on the princess.

“Good evening. I am so glad you finally made it.”

“Forgive my lateness. I got quite caught up in something.”

“Not at all. Come, there are people I would like you to meet.”

The princess accepted the prince’s arm as he began to introduce her to the collection of important locals gathered in the room.

“How late are we?” Galeon asked Sir Alvor quietly.

“A few of the older ones were getting ready to leave.”

Galeon sighed internally. The prince was definitely not happy.

“Princess, your gown is...quite unique. Such an interesting pattern,” one lady commented with a raised eyebrow.

The princess smiled brightly, not missing a beat. “Thank you, it’s new. The design invokes the beauty of Glea marble. Don’t you agree?”

Galeon had the sudden and unacceptable desire to snort.

“Ah.” The lady nodded, her expression growing entirely too earnest. “Very much. I will have my tailor look into a similar design.”

The princess stiffened and looked furtively at Galeon. Galeon had heard the tiny chirp as well, though it was mostly masked by the sounds of clinking and murmurs. Another chirp, and the prince frowned, glancing around.

Galeon thought quickly. It would cause a stir if the ugly, filthy creature was discovered in the princess’s pocket, and the prince was already twirling his ring too rapidly. Galeon needed to do something.

“Give me your handkerchief,” Galeon demanded of Sir Alvor.

“Sir?”

“Just do it.”

Galeon accepted the serviceable but clean handkerchief and stepped forward, clearing her throat.

“You dropped this, Princess.”

“Oh, yes. Excuse me,” she said, smiling at the prince and lady and turning to Galeon.

“Give him to me,” Galeon murmured, keeping her eyes averted.

“What? No.”

“I promise I will keep him safe.”

Galeon could feel a glare burning holes in the side of her face. “Meet me by the end of the drink table.”

Galeon moved to step with her, but the princess stopped.

“I said meet me, not follow me,” she hissed.

“I am supposed to follow you.”

“Well, you are being too obvious about it.”

Galeon waited as the princess drifted her way to the spot noted, and then moved to meet her as casually as she could, stepping conspicuously behind a potted plant.

“Hurt him, and I’ll end you,” the princess stated flatly. Then she was gone, and Galeon was again holding a squirming flightless bird. She tucked him down the front of her breastplate. He wriggled and squawked once, but mercifully settled.

Sir Alvor’s face was twitching with repressed laughter when Galeon rejoined him. “You may need to oil your armor, sir. It seems to be squeaking.”

“How much of that did you see?”

“Most of it. I do believe our new princess will keep things lively around here.”

“Not a word to anyone.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”



AS SOON AS SHE COULD, Della escaped the dreadfully tedious gathering.

“Where is he?” Della demanded of Sir Galeon when they were out in the hallway.

Sir Galeon glanced around, and then tugged at the front of her armor and peered down into it. “He appears to be sleeping. Do you want me to disturb him?”

Della’s heart thudded. She hadn’t seen where Sir Galeon had put him. Yes, Della imagined he was quite comfortable in there. The lucky little bastard.

The thought of tiny Ferno snuggled beneath the knight’s armor was frustratingly endearing.

“I suppose he can stay there for now,” Della conceded as they started walking. “Do you hide things down there all the time?”

Faint amusement crossed Sir Galeon’s expression. Not anything as outlandish as an actual smile, but it softened her features. “No. But it has come in handy on occasion.”

Della really wanted to ask what those occasions were. What else did the woman keep close to her chest? Della bit her tongue and absently touched her neck, making sure it was covered by her hair.

When they reached the tower steps, Sir Galeon finally pulled out an extremely contented Ferno. His feathers had dried and now stood on end in a downy puff. He blinked slowly up from Sir Galeon’s palm, and then opened his beak at the ceiling in a happy yawn.

“What sort of bird is he?” Sir Galeon asked as Della stole him back.

“A phoenix.”

“That explains the smoke. And he’s...your pet?”

“Not really, though we’ve met before. I’ll take him to the garden tomorrow and release him.”

“Oh.” For a moment, Della thought she saw disappointment on the knight’s face. “Very good.”

“Thank you for your help,” Della said, resenting how grateful she truly was.

“Of course.”

Della cradled Ferno closer and hurried upstairs before she could give in to the unreasonable desire to ask Sir Galeon to join them.



GALEON LED THE PRINCESS to the lowest corner of the garden in the early morning. After spending much of the night considering where would be the best place for the young phoenix to thrive until his wings developed and he could fly away, Galeon had decided on here. It was quiet and shaded but had a clearing if he needed sun. A pond stood nearby so he would have water, and the dense brush was less well-tended and therefore would likely have more bugs for him to eat.

It had seemed sound, but Galeon wondered if she'd misjudged when the princess just stared at her after Galeon finished explaining her reasoning.

"Or we can find somewhere else," Galeon said quickly. "There are many good options. If you would like to choose yourself, we can—"

"This is fine."

Wearing a gown of sea green today, the princess produced the phoenix. He was much cleaner and less ugly this morning. Galeon might have almost considered him cute.

"What do you think, Ferno?" the princess said, setting him carefully on his gangly legs. "Go on now."

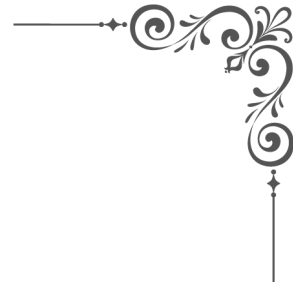
But the bird had his beady eyes fixed on Galeon, as if he could sense what she had in her own pocket.

Galeon crouched and withdrew the handful of seeds she had picked up earlier, scattering them on the ground. The bird flapped his useless wings and attacked the earth with more enthusiasm than skill. "Something to get you started," Galeon murmured, and then tried not to squirm under the princess's intense gaze. "Was that all right to give him?"

The princess nodded.

"Where to now?" Galeon asked, straightening and reminding herself of her primary purpose. Which was not caring for smoking birds, cute or otherwise.

"Let's leave him to his breakfast." The princess slipped her arm through Galeon's. "And find some ourselves."



CHAPTER 7

A BAD IDEA

Della was in trouble. She could feel the magic building, making her stomach cramp. It was accumulating too quickly.

She needed to purge soon, but she couldn't. Not here. All she could do was spend some magic and hope to buy herself time. Since they arrived at the palace, she had not used much. Helping Ferno last week had taken nothing at all.

Even now, the magic called to her, whispering promises she refused to believe. The more it grew, the louder it got until it began to drown out everything else.

Della would not listen. She would not become like Mother.

With the late morning shining brightly, she took the opportunity. She grabbed a vase of flowers from the table and glanced around her empty room, feeling too exposed. Leaving the door to the stairs open so she could hear if anyone was coming, Della climbed inside her wardrobe, pushing aside the soft velvets and furs. As she focused on the flowers and brushed her glowing hands over them, they withered.

All living things had something of a soul. Plant souls looked different than animals or beasts or humans, but they were still souls. Della watched the droplets of life hover over the dead stems. Then she scooped them up before they disappeared and rubbed them back into the petals, reconnecting them until the blooms were springy and vibrant again.

The call of the magic slithered through her. So tempting. But she knew better than to listen. She pushed it away.

She repeated the process, stealing the tiny souls and then returning them. And again.

She felt simultaneously better as her magic slowly depleted, while also worse. The vase grew heavy in her hand and she shakily set it on the wooden floor, slumping into the corner of the wardrobe as she stole and restored the flowers once more.

The call was growing fainter, but harder to ignore as her body weakened. She trembled. This was terribly inefficient, but it was better than the alternative. She would not succumb. She had promised.

Della had just stolen the souls yet again when she heard the footsteps.



GALEON ADJUSTED THE bouquet, standing back and surveying the scene with a critical eye. The prince had said to decorate with flowers, but not what kind, so Galeon had ordered all the kinds she could think of. Now the turret rooftop looked more like a garden. Galeon hoped that was right.

The prince would be meeting them at noon, and the sun was already high. Galeon adjusted the bouquet again, though she wasn't convinced it was quite perfect, and forced herself to leave.

She hurried back through the palace, returning to her post, and climbed the princess's stairs. She carefully knocked on the open door and peered inside.

The princess whirled around, complexion pale beneath an overbright flush on her cheeks, and the hairs raised on Galeon's neck. Something was wrong.

"Are you well?" Galeon asked.

"Fine." The princess sounded out of breath.

Something clinked inside the wardrobe.

"Is someone in there?" Galeon asked, drawing her sword.

"No, of course not." The princess raised her chin and Galeon reached for the handle. "Don't."

The princess grabbed Galeon's arm, but she'd already yanked the door and it swung open.

A quick rummage revealed nothing unusual except a vase of shriveled flowers that had tipped over, leaving a fresh spill of water on the dark wood. Galeon was relieved to see they included both a yellow and pink variety she had ordered for the turret. Then her relief evaporated. Or did it mean that the princess disliked them, if she hid them in her wardrobe?

Galeon righted the vase and turned back to find the princess glaring at her, arms crossed over her chest.

“Satisfied?” the princess snapped.

Something still had Galeon’s senses on high alert, but nothing appeared out of place.

“You seem to have a habit of invading my wardrobe,” the princess accused.

“I apologize for that. But I swore to protect you. I meant it.”

“Why are you even here? What do you want?”

“The prince would like to see you.”

“Now?”

“Soon.”

The princess swayed. Galeon steadied her with an arm around her waist and a hastily withdrawn hand on her hip.

Sweat glistened on the princess’s skin and her arm felt clammy as Galeon tried not to touch her more than necessary.

“You should rest.” Galeon steered her toward the bed, but the princess pulled away, stumbling and nearly falling. Galeon wasn’t taking any chances near the stairs. She swept the princess up into her arms.

“I’m fine,” the princess protested while she shook.

“I will call a physician,” Galeon promised, depositing her onto the mattress, but a surprisingly strong hand grasped onto Galeon’s wrist below her gauntlet, preventing her from turning away.

“No. No physician.”

“You are unwell.”

“And I said no.” Steel sharpened her voice. “I forbid it. You will not tell anyone.”

Galeon hesitated. “The prince will have my head if I don’t.”

“And I will have it if you do.”

Galeon stared down at the lovely woman who could indeed have Galeon’s head if she so chose.

“Please,” the princess breathed, her grip on Galeon’s wrist shifting so her hand slipped into Galeon’s.

Galeon’s resistance crumbled. “Then what can I do?”

“Just stay here with me.”

Galeon stayed motionless as the princess closed her eyes, still gripping Galeon’s hand. The prolonged contact of skin against skin felt strange. Galeon had not held anyone’s hand since Lillian.

Galeon’s heart started to gallop and her palm grew sweaty, but the princess did not seem to mind, for she did not let go.



DELLA CLUTCHED SIR Galeon’s hand, the contact grounding her. Physical touch always helped recenter her in this world after she had touched the other for too long, as she had just now. Tingles of magic still ran through her, but they were manageable. She let the feeling of warm skin gather her strength, and the queasiness eased.

She blinked open her eyes. Instead of glancing away as she always did, Sir Galeon held Della’s gaze for a moment. Her irises were a lovely soft brown, which appeared golden in this light. Della was tempted to reach up and trace the scar cutting through her face, the long-healed edges uneven. Della wondered how it would move when the woman smiled, and Della suddenly wanted to see that.

Della longed so much to be held.

Instead, she settled for the comfort of a hand.

“How are you feeling?” Sir Galeon asked, her voice disarmingly gentle.

“Better. I just need some water, and I will be ready.”

Sir Galeon pulled away and Della reluctantly let her go, her palm empty and cold in her absence. She watched Sir Galeon’s hands flex around the goblet and pitcher of water as she poured. Della sighed silently. Why did the lady knight have to have such strong hands?

Della accepted the goblet and sipped slowly, making sure it stayed down. She was a bit wobbly as she stood, but she would manage. Sir

Galeon offered her arm, and Della leaned on it, letting the knight take her weight as they descended the stairs.

“Why does the prince wish to see me?” Della asked.

“Does he need a reason?”

“I have not seen him in nearly a week. I would say he does.”

“He has a surprise for you.”

“I hate surprises. What is it?”

Sir Galeon swallowed and looked uncomfortable. “You will see, Princess.”

“Remember the chopping-off-your-head conversation we just had?”

Sir Galeon swallowed again. “I think it is best for you to see it yourself. Please do not ask me to ruin it.”

Guilt for the threat washed through Della. Sir Galeon was just doing what the prince had asked. Della relented and wished her guard were not so loyal.

She followed Sir Galeon to a new part of the palace, then up a seemingly never-ending flight of stairs.

Della squinted in the sunlight, taking in the sweeping view. It was the tallest point in the whole structure. The River Glea stretched far up into the mountains on one side, and emptied into the sea on the other, the coast a distant shimmer.

The turret itself was littered with colorful flowers and the floor was spread with a plush rug as a small feast languished in the shade of a silver awning.

“Is this my surprise?” Della asked as Galeon darted forward and adjusted a bouquet.

“Is it all right?” Sir Galeon watched her too closely.

“It’s beautiful. Did you do all this?” Della was charmed by the display, despite herself.

“I helped.”

Della raised her eyebrows. "And by that, do you mean you arranged the whole thing?"

"I helped. But it was the prince's idea."

"And where is the prince?"

"He...should be here soon."

Della smiled and sank down in the shade on the soft rug. "Yes, this is all right." Then she poured herself some wine as she appreciated the view. Not of the land, but of the thoughtful knight shining brightly in her silver armor.

Della was in grave danger of liking her.



THE WARMTH THAT SWEPT through Galeon was not entirely from the sun overhead as she watched the princess recline in the shade, wine staining her lips red.

"You should join me," the princess said, and Galeon shook her head. She already wanted to join her too much.

Galeon was relieved when Prince Valin and Sir Alvor arrived, panting from the long climb. The prince greeted the princess with a bow and then swept his eyes around the scene before landing on Galeon.

"I know I'm late," he muttered as he walked past. "So don't look at me like that."

"I am not looking any way, Your Highness," Galeon answered quickly.

"May I offer you some wine?" the princess asked, amusement in her question.

Prince Valin flushed as she handed him a drink from the picnic he had supposedly arranged for her yet been unable to show up on time for. Galeon's rush of pleasure at the princess's expression was combated by her reaction to defend the prince.

"Have you been waiting long?" Prince Valin asked as he took his seat.

"Not long. I know you are very busy."

The prince blew out his breath. "Very. I'm afraid I cannot stay long today." He glanced at Galeon, and she kept her face carefully blank.

“I see.” The princess did not appear bothered by the news in the slightest.

“I am afraid I got myself into a...situation.” The prince glanced at Galeon again. “Several noble families just arrived for the wedding. I wasn’t expecting them quite so soon. And, well, I promised them a hunt.”

“I see.”

“I didn’t plan to,” he added, a bit defensively. “It’s just that they asked, and I said I would go. You probably are not interested in having anything to do with a hunt, but if you were—”

“I will come.”

“You will?”

“I am not squeamish, if that is your concern. A trip into the valley sounds nice. A queen should be familiar with her kingdom, should she not?”

Prince Valin looked relieved. “Very true. We can leave tomorrow afternoon.” He turned his smile on Galeon. “You’ll arrange it, won’t you, Gal?”

Galeon thought of all she’d need to do. It wasn’t enough time. She would make it enough. She looked at Sir Alvor, who just closed his eyes on a grimace. “Of course, Your Highness.”



ANNET’S SCOWL SUCKED the light and warmth from Della’s room that night as Della explained her plan.

“Do you think a hunt is a good idea right now?” Annet asked in a tone that made it clear Annet did not.

“I’m supposed to be pretending to make a life here. Besides, being away from the palace might give me an opportunity to slip away and purge.”

“Or it might not, with that knight watching your every move like she wants to eat you.”

“Will you come with me?” Della asked, ignoring that last part.

“I can. But the crypt warden promised she’d show me around tomorrow.”

Della blew out her breath. “That is more important. We will need to know the layout, as you probably won’t attend the funeral.”

“Exactly.”

Della smiled. “You are remarkably good at infiltration.”

“Naturally. Little sisters always are. We have to learn quickly to keep up.”

Della’s smile faded. Annet had needed to grow up too fast. They had both been too young when Mother had turned. When the call of the green sickness overwhelmed her. When she wrapped her scabbed hands around Della’s neck and snapped it.

That was when Della had learned what her magic did. It had been dormant until then. Until its host needed it. And Della had needed it that day. Annet as well.

Della’s magic could not heal, but it could convince a soul to stay or go. When Della’s own body tried to die, she’d stubbornly refused to leave. She had clawed her way back and reattached, over and over, until her young neck reluctantly healed, if a bit crooked. Annet had been there to help her each time.

Della shook off the memories and phantom pain and refocused on her sister.

“What about you?” Della asked, noting how at ease Annet seemed.

“I purged last night. The cook showed me a conveniently soundproofed cellar last week.” Della raised an eyebrow at Annet’s quick smirk. “Your levels are too high though,” Annet said, sobering. “I can tell. I can sneak you down there.”

“You just pointed out how diligent my knight is.”

“I could always...”

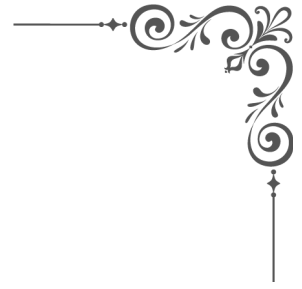
“No,” Della said firmly. “You cannot compel her. It’s too risky.”

“Fine,” Annet conceded. When Annet used her compulsion, the target knew they were being compelled, which made discretion difficult. It was

only used as a last resort.

“I will be able to make it through the hunting trip, even if I cannot slip away. It should only be a few days. I can manage that.”

“If you say so,” Annet said, looking doubtful. “And if needed, I’ll get you to that cellar when you are back. One way or another.”



CHAPTER 8

THE HUNT BEGINS

Dusk gathered as their party reached the camp. Several large tents already crowded the clearing, their colorful damask and patterned walls of heavy fabric jarring amongst the trees. Hunting dogs yipped and snarled over the snorting horses, the clank of food being hastily prepared, and the tuning of several stringed instruments.

Galeon dismounted, handing the reins off to a young lad, and then moved to the princess, who was having difficulty extracting her feet from the stirrups. She glanced at Galeon and leaned toward her, bracing her hand on Galeon's shoulder.

"I can't feel my legs," she whispered. "And I think I might be sick."

She did look pale. Galeon hurriedly helped free her extra wide skirts and leather booted feet, not lingering over her ankles and briefly exposed calves. Then Galeon guided her down to the ground. The princess slid against her, face screwing up. Galeon took as much weight as she could without picking her up.

Prince Valin appeared with a smile. "What a fabulous ride! Are you hungry, Princess? It shall be a delightful evening."

The princess agreed, smiling through her obvious pain. "How nice. But I am rather tired. I think I might rest first."

Galeon steered the princess away, acting as a second pair of legs as they tottered over to a green-and-cream tent on the opposite side of camp.

The princess was stoic until the flap closed behind them and Galeon had to catch her, scooping her up and carrying her to the plush slung cot in the temporary room.

"Can I get you anything?" Galeon asked, kneeling beside the bed, desperate to erase the discomfort from the princess's expression.

"The basin. Quickly."

As soon as Galeon retrieved the requested basin, the princess snatched it and doubled over. She truly was ill.

“You need a physician,” Galeon said, concern filling her chest as she helped support the basin, which shook in the princess’s hands.

“No, I don’t.”



DELLA FOUGHT THE MAGIC trying to seep out of her pores. Too much of it flooded her veins, the call growing overwhelming. She tried to shut her mind. She had been wrong—she couldn’t make it. She had to purge. Tonight. There was no other option.

Her body convulsed again, but nothing came up. Her throat and mouth burned with acid, and hot needles stabbed her whole lower half as blood returned to it.

Della had only ever ridden a singular horse before today, and it had not gone well. But Della had not been able to admit that when Sir Galeon presented her with the dark mare. Princesses rode horses. So she spent too many hours tensing up to avoid toppling off the wretched creature.

“Let me send for someone,” Sir Galeon was saying.

Della shook her head. “No,” she repeated, but it came out weakly.

“May I check your head?”

The backs of cool fingers brushed against Della’s brow, and then swept away a strand of hair clinging to her sticky forehead.

“You are burning up,” Sir Galeon said, frowning. Then her expression changed.

Della glanced down and realized she was glowing faintly as the realms wavered.

She frantically grasped at the strands of her magic and pulled them back, twisting them up into a ball and shoving it deeper inside herself.

The knight blinked rapidly as if trying to clear her vision, and Della’s heart hammered, hoping Sir Galeon wouldn’t trust her own eyes.

“I need a moment alone,” Della said. “I need to rest.”

“I take it you will have my head if I tell the prince?” Sir Galeon’s intense gaze searched Della’s flushed face.

“Precisely. And don’t let anyone in here.”

Sir Galeon hesitated, and then she tried to take the basin of sick with her.

“Leave it,” Della said. “I may need it again.”

“Princess...”

“You are dismissed, Sir Galeon.”

Sir Galeon bowed stiffly. “I will be just outside.” And she disappeared.

Della covered her face with a shaking hand. She had hoped for the chance to get away and purge, but she didn’t have time to wait for a good chance. She would sneak out later. But first, she had to be well enough to attend dinner. If she admitted to being ill, they would surely send for a physician, who might recognize that the sickness in her was not a natural one.

She reached out for the ground, sliding from the cot attempting to trap her with comfort. A rug had been placed down, but beneath it was life. Della flipped back the corner and ran her hands over the stubbly grass. It was growing dark, but that couldn’t be helped. Her hands glowed as she severed the lives of the plants and worms and mites beneath her palms. Then she reattached them. She found a large beetle that tried to scuttle away.

“Sorry,” Della whispered as she plucked out its soul. The carcass stilled. Then she coaxed the shimmering droplet back down and it started scuttling again, its movements erratic and dazed. Della let it go. She knew how unpleasant it was coming back.

Della lay on the ground, resting her head on her arm as she tried to expend a bit of her magic. She started to sweat, and her stomach convulsed again. The lies were calling prettily.

By the time it was fully dark, she had managed to get her magic levels back under control, but her body was exhausted. She tried to crawl back into her cot, which had suddenly become the size of a mountain.

Della couldn’t trust anyone, but she needed to recover fast.

“Sir Galeon?”

The knight immediately appeared, so very dependable and sturdy. Her brows drew together when she saw Della lying on the ground, the rug rumpled beneath her.

“Help,” Della whispered, and Sir Galeon was already there, scooping her up and placing her in the cot.

Della wound her arms around Sir Galeon’s neck. When she tried to pull away, Della would not let her.

“Um...Princess?” Sir Galeon tried again to pull back, but Della dug her fingers into Galeon’s nape, feeling the knot of her hair and the strong muscles and tendons of her neck. Della wished the cold metal of her armor was gone, but this would do. She needed contact. Della hugged Sir Galeon, cradling her head, and using the woman to anchor herself.

Sir Galeon was stiff in Della’s embrace, her hands braced by her sides.

“We mustn’t do this,” Sir Galeon said as Della pressed her face into Galeon’s neck, where a pulse thrummed strong and quick. “It’s not that I don’t want...I’m sorry if I made you think—I mean, if things were different, but...”

Della slid her nose along a warm jaw, relishing the feeling of skin against her own. It took her a moment to realize what Sir Galeon was saying. Della’s heart thumped. Of course Sir Galeon would think this was something else. The not-quite admission of her desire made Della’s body respond in ways it hadn’t been a moment before but definitely had in the quiet darkness of her room over the past weeks.

So Sir Galeon did like women. Della had wondered. Part of her wished she hadn’t learned that fact.

The metal breastplate pressed against Della’s chest as she arched into it. Sir Galeon’s breath hitched.

“If things were different?” Della asked.

“What?” Sir Galeon croaked and Della’s insides trembled.

“You said ‘if things were different.’ What would you do?” The magic in Della’s blood still flowed too strong, making her reckless. She brushed her thigh against the outside of Sir Galeon’s.

“We mustn’t,” Sir Galeon repeated. “We can’t.”

Della knew Sir Galeon was right. Things weren’t different. Della was already overdue at dinner. She needed to pretend to be fine and choke down some food. And then she needed to sneak past this beautiful woman.

Della’s arms fell away and finally let Sir Galeon go, which she did, hastily retreating.

Della tried not to let that sting. Everyone pulled away. They always left.

“I need to change for dinner. Send someone to help me,” Della said, re-donning the mask of the princess.



GALEON WATCHED THE princess smile at Prince Valin and nibble on her food. She was still pale, but it was difficult to see in the torches and candlelight of the evening.

Galeon saw it. She wished she didn’t.

The imprinted feeling of hands on her skin, caressing her, made Galeon’s knees want to buckle. She hadn’t been held like that in so long. She had put that need to bed when she laid Lillian in the ground. But somehow, new needy hands had reawakened it.

Galeon had been right to say no. She couldn’t go down that road, even if part of her craved it more than her next breath. Not with the princess. Not with the woman engaged to Galeon’s prince. Not with her future queen.

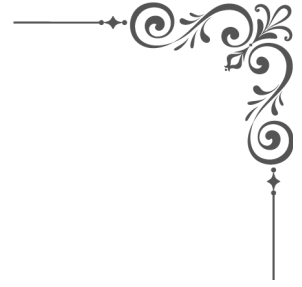
Galeon must have gone temporarily mad to even be having these thoughts. Perhaps she had deprived herself of physical connection for too long. Perhaps it wasn’t the princess at all, but just the natural course of Galeon’s body wanting something it hadn’t had for ten years. When they returned to the palace, Galeon would go into the city and...

And what? The thought of finding some strange woman made her ill. Galeon didn’t want another woman. She hadn’t thought she would ever want one after Lillian. She had found plenty attractive enough to cause a flutter here and there. There had been a few stolen, passionless kisses that ended quickly. But nothing more moving than that. Until now, apparently.

Galeon had dedicated her life to the prince and found solace in that. She had purpose. She had honor. She would not throw that away, no matter how lovely the princess looked in her dark, tight gown with her hair brushing her waist.

Galeon reminded herself of her vow and duty to protect the princess. She focused on that as the nobles who paid Galeon no mind laughed and drank and chatted. The princess was part of their circle. Galeon was the one who stood to the side and watched. That was how it was and how it would always be. How it should be.

What Galeon wanted or the things her traitorous body wished were possible were irrelevant. Galeon's purpose was to keep the princess safe. She would do so at any cost.



CHAPTER 9

LIGHTNING AND THUNDER

Della lay awake as the sounds of the night croaked. She waited until she ceased to hear feet rustling over the ground and the rumble of whispered voices. Then she waited longer.

The air was cool as she swung her legs out of the cozy cot. The ropes beneath the mattress creaked and she froze, glancing at the door.

The back of the tent was pinned and stretched to keep the fabric taut. Della groped along the bottom edge and found one of the stakes. Slowly and carefully, she wiggled it free, which gave her just enough slack.

She peered out first, making sure no one was watching, and then wriggled beneath and slipped into the moonlit night. The damp grass and dirt stained her nightgown, but it didn't matter.

She moved slowly at first, trying to be quiet, checking over her shoulder. When no one followed, she quickened her steps, and then ran. She knew she might become lost, but had to get away. Growing lost in the wilderness of the valley was better than letting the magic take her.

She found a shallow ravine and slowed, catching her breath. This would have to do.

Della knelt, pine needles jabbing through her ruined, delicate nightgown. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth.

Loud echoes in her mind reminded her of the pain that was coming. The lies promised she would never feel that pain if she just gave in. Why purge when she could simply surrender to the magic?

Della sank her fingers into the earth. Once she started, she wouldn't be able to stop. She took a steadying breath.

It was a release and clenching at the same time. She channeled her magic and it began to flush out through her very skin. Liquid light gathered and dripped from the ends of her unbound hair, but never reached the ground.

It always started gently, tricking her mind and body into relaxing, and half believing it wouldn't be so bad this time.

Even though she had been expecting it, when the first lash of pain shocked her, Della couldn't stop the whimper that escaped her closed lips. Her body jerked, instinct telling her to run, but there was no outrunning this.

Della dug her fingers deeper into the soil. She would never surrender to the magic. So, she surrendered to the pain.



GALEON SHIFTED FROM foot to foot. The movement helped keep her awake. She would rouse Sir Daric in the early morning for a quick break to catch some sleep of her own, but until then, she needed to stay alert.

She couldn't stop thinking about the woman who was shrouded in the tent behind her. They hadn't spoken of it, and Galeon was glad of that. The princess had not taken her arm after dinner, but rather walked a pace apart, and then disappeared inside without a word.

Galeon was glad of that as well. She was just having a hard time convincing herself.

The moon was high, shining down and illuminating the clearing of the camp. The wind rustled branches nearby. Something hooted and creaked from the woods. It reminded Galeon of what could be lurking unseen and unheard behind the veil of trees. Unease washed over her. She stilled and listened, but heard nothing. Too much nothing.

"Princess?" Galeon murmured, holding her ear near the flap of the tent that acted as a door.

Nothing.

Galeon shouldn't intrude, but the unease intensified. She had learned better than to ignore it.

Galeon peeked inside and whispered again. No reply. No sound of quiet breathing. Even as Galeon threw back the flap, she already knew in the sinking of her gut that something was wrong.

By the faint light of the moon filtering in, she could clearly see the empty cot. Her eyes fixed on the discarded stake and loose section of wall.

Galeon cursed and darted around to the back of the tent, where a single set of footprints in the damp earth led away.

Anger and fear gripped Galeon. Why would the princess leave? Galeon hadn't thought her foolish.

There wasn't much trail to follow as Galeon ran into the moonlit forest, looking for anything she could.

Her heart thundered and then the night illuminated with lightning to match.

Galeon halted. The sky was clear. The bright flash of light had a familiar green tint to it.

That had not been lightning.

Galeon took off at a sprint toward the place it had come from. The green flash lit the trees again, emanating from the other side of a small rise. Galeon drew her sword and crested it, ready to cut the monster down.

The princess was there. Relief half formed in Galeon's chest as it took her mind a moment to wrap around what she was seeing.

The princess crouched on the ground, her back arched in agony as the green light wreathed and contorted her figure. She let out a quiet yelp. Her thin nightgown that had once been white was plastered to her body. She looked wild, terrifying, and enthralling.

Galeon had seen enough magic in her time to recognize its sickly green. And it was coming from *her*.

Galeon knew what this beautiful creature would eventually become. Her blood ran cold.

Part of Galeon was telling her to raise her sword and end it. Another part wanted to soothe and protect. And the rest of her wanted to turn and run the other way.

"What is this?" Galeon asked, the question coming out loud and breathless at the same time. She already knew, but a fragment of her hoped she was mistaken. That some explanation would alter the reality of it.

The princess shuddered and looked up. Her hair fell in damp hanks around her haunted face.

“What does it look like?” Her voice was strained. She started to say something else but the green flashed again and her words were lost as she writhed, then stilled. “I’m almost done,” she choked.

Galeon watched, frozen in horrid fascination as the princess contorted again, the magic leaving her body in brutal pulses. Galeon had never witnessed a purging before. It was ugly and gruesome in a way that was unlike anything else.

Finally, the princess collapsed to the ground. The glow that shrouded her faded, leaving her fragile and defenseless. A maiden in the night. Yet she wasn’t that.

“You are a witch,” Galeon stated, horror swirling around her.

With apparent difficulty, the princess turned her head, a glistening dampness streaking her face. “Yes.”

“Well. Fuck.”

“Yes.”

Galeon ran a hand over her own face. How was this possible? How could the princess have hidden it for so long?

“What are you going to do about it?” the princess asked faintly.

“I—”

“Will you tell the prince?”

“I should.”

“But will you?”

Galeon couldn’t form a reply. The world spun confusingly around them.

“Please.” The princess started to crawl, dragging herself shakily forward. “I’m not a monster. I cannot prevent the magic, but I can get rid of it. I won’t turn. I promised...”

“The prince should know.”

“He wouldn’t understand. No one understands. And the treaty would break. This could start a war. Are you prepared to do that?”

Galeon didn't want to think about what might happen if the princess's secret came to light. "That's not fair."

"Life isn't. Some things are more important than the truth. Please, Galeon. You swore to protect me, didn't you?"

She looked so vulnerable and innocent and it jarred against the knowledge in Galeon's head and heart that witches were evil, and they always became monsters. Sooner or later, the magic consumed its hosts and turned them into malignants. Sooner or later, they all succumbed.

Galeon gripped her sword. Despite what she just witnessed, and despite knowing what this woman was, the thought of raising her weapon against her was unthinkable. Galeon had vowed to protect her.

When the princess tried to stand, she collapsed again.

The soothe and protect instinct won out. Galeon sheathed her sword and moved to help, cradling the witch in her arms.



AS GALEON'S HOLD CLOSED protectively around her, Della relaxed. She cupped Galeon's cheek, closing her eyes with a sigh.

Galeon jerked her head back. "What are you doing?"

Della blinked. "I need..." She reached up again, and Galeon let her.

"What sort of witch are you?" Galeon asked harshly, but she still held Della gently. "Are you enchanting me?"

"No. No enchanting. The magic is all gone now."

"But it will come back."

"Yes," Della mumbled, the weight of sleep dragging at her. Every part of her ached. She rested her cheek on the cold metal of Galeon's shoulder as Galeon carried her through the forest.

The next thing Della knew, she was blinking open her eyes in the too-early light of morning.

She lay still for a moment, listening to the quiet camp. She was on her cot, the covers tucked carefully around her.

Fear skittered through her at the memory of last night and her eyes shifted to the fabric flap that was her doorway. She calmed herself with the

knowledge that Galeon only knew about Della—she didn't know about Annet. And Della wasn't in a metal cage yet, so Galeon must have kept her secret. For now.

The cool morning air slithered up Della's legs as she stood. She was a mess. Dirt and dried mud stained her gown, and she must look a fright.

The chilling water in her washbasin grew muddied and brown as she scrubbed the evidence away. She pulled on a soft robe, and then balled up the ruined nightgown and shoved it deep into the corner of her trunk. She would ask Annet to help her destroy it when they returned to the palace.

Cautiously, Della approached the door and peeked out. Galeon was standing just outside. She turned her head only, not meeting Della's gaze.

"Good morning," Della whispered, peering through the gap in the fabric, using it as a shield. When she realized what she was doing, she forced herself to push it aside more.

Galeon wore dark circles beneath her eyes in the soft dawn. Like she hadn't slept.

"How are you feeling this morning, Princess?" Galeon asked, her tone carefully flat.

"Much better.

Tension clung to them, thick and uncertain.

"Do you need something, Princess?"

"I want to talk to you. About last night—"

"I don't. Nothing happened last night."

Della should have been glad about that response. Instead, she was disconcertingly annoyed by it. Hurt swirled in her belly. Galeon knew the darkest secret she carried, had seen her at her most vulnerable. Della's life was in Galeon's hands. And Galeon didn't want to look at it.

Before Della could press Galeon for more, a maid arrived to help Della dress. Della stood aside and let the older woman into the tent and the door flap fell, blocking Galeon from sight.



“YOU LOOK TERRIBLE, Gal. Rough night?” Prince Valin said, bumping Galeon’s shoulder as they walked through the trees.

The princess rode her horse loudly a few paces behind, Sir Alvor on her right. Galeon had asked to switch with him for a bit. Galeon needed to at least pretend to have some distance from the woman consuming her mind.

The prince had said something.

Galeon elbowed her way through the fog of her exhaustion. “Yes, Your Highness. Not much sleep.”

“Well, you’d best keep your wits about you out here. The griffins are in breeding season.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The prince chuckled. “I’ve missed you.” Then he leaned in a bit closer. “How is the princess? She seems much brighter today.”

They both looked back. The princess was indeed more animated, and she engaged more with the others. Unlike Galeon, the princess had slept soundly.

“She is.”

Galeon’s gut twisted. Galeon knew why the princess was better. Because she wasn’t being corrupted by the evil within her. Yet.

Galeon was having the hardest time believing what she had learned last night. She couldn’t reveal it, for the risk of what would happen to the princess and their kingdom. But she also couldn’t not reveal it, for the deception to her prince. She was trapped, paralyzed with indecision, between two doors she refused to open. So she pretended it hadn’t happened. She tried to unsee the princess’s pain and the sickly green flashes as the magic that would one day consume her tortured her.

Galeon focused on the antics of the hunting dogs, who had caught a scent and led them up a gentle hill. Strong muscles beneath sleek coats tugged on leashes, and wagging tails thunked against legs slowing them down. Galeon had always wanted a dog. But Lillian had said no, and Galeon was now glad. It would have been another thing to lose.

Galeon walked beside the prince, who preferred to hunt on foot. He chatted with a few other nobles Galeon should have remembered the names of, but she didn't particularly care about this morning. She nodded and bowed politely, not listening to the conversation.

The dogs lost the scent, and suddenly it was midday. Time was a strange thing.

They stopped by a cackling stream on its way to feed the main River Glea in the valley basin. Food was unpacked and blankets were laid down on the scrubby grass by the bank. Galeon fiddled with a clasp of one of her gauntlets to do something with her hands.

Sir Alvor dismounted and reached toward the princess to help her down off her horse.

Galeon moved before she realized it. She didn't like the princess touching him, thanking him, when Galeon should have been the one helping her.

Galeon's thoughts startled her, but they didn't alter her strides.

"Thank you, Sir Alvor. You may return to the prince," Galeon said, her voice coming out gruff.

Sir Alvor gave Galeon a knowing smirk as he obeyed. Galeon didn't care.

The princess watched Galeon with an unreadable expression. Galeon feared her own expression was *too* readable. Galeon didn't know herself what it would say. Perhaps the princess could just tell her, so then Galeon could figure out how to deal with the mess clogging her head.

The ground started to rumble. It climbed up Galeon's boots and penetrated the haze of confusion and fatigue.

The dogs barked, and then took off, their instincts telling them to run.

Galeon's body reacted, even if her mind was still sluggish. She seized the princess by the waist and hoisted her unceremoniously back up onto her mount. The princess gasped in surprise, but Galeon didn't have time to apologize as she swung up behind her. Galeon locked eyes with Sir Alvor, who was ushering the prince to his horse. Galeon trusted Sir Alvor to keep him out of harm. She had to.

The other nobles shrieked and remounted as well. Galeon didn't care about them, her focus solely on the safety of the woman between her thighs.

"What's happening?" the princess asked.

"Stampede."

The rumbling grew louder as Galeon spurred the horse into a reluctant gallop.

The uncontrollable herd of beasts was already nearly on them, barreling down through the valley, the splintering of trees echoing closer as they were uncaringly smashed.

The princess gripped the saddle, and Galeon urged the horse faster.

The princess's mount had been chosen for its gentle nature. It was not a knight's steed and struggled with two riders on it, one in armor.

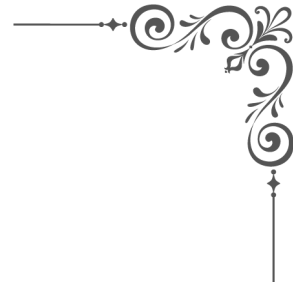
They started to fall behind.

The rumbling was deafening. Getting closer.

Galeon pressed the reins into the princess's hands and her mouth to her ear. "Ride as hard as you can. Don't stop."

"What are you..."

Galeon didn't hear the rest as she threw herself off the back of the horse.



CHAPTER 10

STAMPEDE

The hard press of Galeon disappeared from Della's back. Twisting around, Della watched her hit the ground in a roll, somehow managing to come up to her feet, her sword out, ready to fight off the stampede of towering beasts single-handedly.

Della hauled on the reins of the spooked horse, trying to get it to turn back, but the creature's instinct to escape was too strong. Della lost her balance, landing on the ground in a much less impressive sprawl.

It knocked the wind from her lungs momentarily and she struggled to gather it back in. As she did, she rapidly assessed her options.

To the east ran the stream, which was now more of a small river. She could try to enter the water to avoid the stampede.

Then she looked at where Galeon stood in its path.

Della should let her die. It would solve several of her problems. No need to worry about her spilling Della's secret.

Della should look the other way. She told herself that as she started sprinting toward the confoundingly noble and foolhardy knight.

The first griffin appeared through the tree line. A breeding female. Her feathers were pearlescent, running from her sharp beak down an elegant neck, transitioning to white fur on powerful legs as long as Della was tall. She was beautiful.

Galeon dodged the magnificent creature. Della's heart raced as her feet did too, barely avoiding the beast who would crush her without a thought.

Then the rest of the herd emerged through the trees. None were quite as stunning as their matriarch, blurring in browns and rusty golds, claws spitting up earth. Della kept running toward them. Galeon dodged one, then a second.

Della gathered all the budding tendrils of magic in her body. There wasn't much. It would need to be enough.

Della reached Galeon just before the beast did. Della raised her hands, feeling for the thread of life approaching, and slashed to the side as she

ruthlessly yanked the protesting soul. She didn't have a good grasp on it, and it only came halfway out, and then tore. Della screamed in sympathetic pain.

The griffin's body crumpled, its momentum still carrying it forward. Galeon grappled Della, twisting and taking the brunt of the impact.

Della ended up pressed into the forest floor with Galeon curled around her, protecting her from the struggling griffin on top of them.

The herd thundered past. Their hulking shield of feather and fur jerked, shoving them roughly along the ground. Silk ripped and the bite of metal dug into Della's back. But she was still breathing when the rumbling faded into the valley.

Then Della was moving again but not of her own accord, expelled from beneath the terrible crushing weight.

She looked around, the sun shining more freely down amongst the splintered trees and churned-up earth. Galeon crawled out and collapsed on her back beside the twitching beast Della had mangled.

"You hurt?" Galeon wheezed as Della crouched over her. Della shook her head, and then winced at the twinge in her neck. "Good," Galeon choked, reaching with shaking hands to the straps near her ribs, face contorting.

Della hurried to help, undoing the buckles and clasps on the side of Galeon's breastplate, realizing it was warped and indented, curling inward instead of out. Galeon hissed, but then her shallow gasps rushed and lengthened as the constricting piece of metal loosened.

"How bad is it?" Della asked.

Galeon replied with an incoherent mutter that sounded like a curse. She continued to pant, but the breaths came easier.

Della turned her attention to the faintly trembling griffin, fighting back the bile at seeing it like that—seeing what she'd done to it. She leaned over and examined the state of the poor, torn soul. It wasn't fully separated, the halves still connected by a sliver. Della slowly coaxed it free, and the beast finally stilled.

Della cradled the soul in her palm. She didn't want to let it go, and not like this. The magic's call was faint, urging her to give it over. Della ran her fingers over the tear, trying to smooth it out, but it resisted her. She didn't have enough magic in her.

"Give me more," Della demanded of the magic. It didn't respond.

She closed her eyes, sensing the threads in her. Like veins connecting her to the terrible heart. Usually, Della tried to minimize the flow. Now, she pulled, drawing magic into her. She had never done this before, and it was more than a little terrifying.

When Della had enough, she refocused on the soul. She rubbed the tear, and like buffing out a scratch, it started to mend. When the tear was gone, Della pressed it back into the griffin.

"Sorry," Della murmured, running a hand over the stiff plumage and surprisingly soft fur.

The griffin jerked, knocking Della backward as it stumbled clumsily to its feet. Galeon grabbed her arm and they scrambled away as the beast let out a cry and flapped its wings. Then it disappeared into the trees, some instinct calling it to follow its herd.

"What'd you do?" Galeon asked, staring after the long-gone griffin.

"I let it go."

Then Galeon looked at Della, her words blending into one another. "Why're you here?"

"I fell."

Galeon narrowed her slightly unfocused eyes, a flash of anger twisting her beautiful face. "You jumped."

Della's own anger rose up. "You're welcome for saving your life."

"I told you to ride."

"Well, I don't listen."

They glared at each other. Then Galeon sagged, grimacing. Della's anger faded as she moved to keep Galeon propped up, so she didn't fall back onto her injured side.

“Need to get back to camp,” Galeon gritted out, seeming to take her obvious pain and tuck it away as she pushed unsteadily to her feet. She limped stiffly over to where her sword lay bent and crushed into the earth a distance away. She came back up pale, her undone breastplate hanging oddly.

“You should rest,” Della said.

“Camp,” Galeon stated again, as if the word would make it appear. “Need to get you safe.”

“I can take care of myself.” Della grabbed Galeon as she swayed dangerously.

Galeon looked at her with a glaze to her eyes. Not all the words came out correctly when she spoke. “But I wanna be the one to take care of you.” She sounded drunk and looked more unstable the longer she stood.

Della stepped into Galeon’s side and ducked under her arm. “Very well. Let’s go, then.”



GALEON’S HEAD WAS ABOUT to burst. Pain pounded through it. With each breath she took, her ribs stabbed. But she would not let that stop her. They had to get back to camp. Galeon’s rattled mind latched onto that goal and it became her mission. She wouldn’t fail. Not again.

The princess was helping her. The princess shouldn’t be helping her.

Galeon tried to stand a bit straighter, but the pain nearly made her double over.

“You need to rest,” the princess said far too loudly, and Galeon winced.

Galeon shook her head and winced again.

She had to focus. She squinted up at the excruciating sun and surrounding valley. She knew which direction the camp was in—she just had to make her brain remember.

The princess’s lush body pressed against Galeon’s side. Galeon cursed her armor, perhaps for the first time, for preventing the sensation from reaching her skin.

The low, dirt-striped bodice beside her distracted Galeon from her own body. A skirt seam had split and ripped partway up, and every now and then Galeon caught a glimpse of creamy skin. Despite everything—or perhaps because of it—Galeon’s desire burned hotter. She was in no shape to do anything about it. She just knew she wanted, and she was too muddled to stop it.

The princess’s sharp profile cut through the thick air. Her nose was wonderfully pointed and home to a few stray dots. A mole decorated the corner of one dark, large, lash-fringed eye. It was the most captivating mole Galeon had ever seen.

The princess frowned sideways at her, and Galeon realized she had swayed so close she was almost touching the princess’s face as she stared.

Mortified, Galeon leaned away as much as possible while still relying on the other woman for support.

The sun beat down on them, the angle steadily changing as they traversed the meadows and forests and swells that transitioned the tall, rugged mountains into the valley basin.

A few times, Galeon got thoroughly confused and thought they were going in the wrong direction, but then the sun reminded her. It was far too bright.

Galeon loathed the blinding, cheery bastard.

“What?” the princess asked, and Galeon frowned. “You just said to ‘fuck off’—I gather that was not directed toward me?”

“Oh. No...the sun.”

Galeon thought she heard the princess laugh.

Her head throbbed.



ONE OF THE VERY FEW benefits that came with the curse of Della’s magic was the unnatural strength it gave her. Still, she was growing weary from the weight of Galeon’s arm around her for so long by the time dusk settled over the land. Relief washed through Della when the sound of the hooves and calls approaching reached her ears.

“Here!” Della called. “We are here!”

One of Galeon’s guards dismounted, rushing forward to help. Della gratefully passed the burden off to the young man, who tried to grasp Galeon on the wrong side. Galeon grimaced but didn’t say anything.

“Not that side,” Della scolded, and the guard blanched.

More voices echoed and two riders appeared.

“Gal!” Prince Valin swung off his horse and brushed the guard aside to pull Galeon into a tight hug that must have made her want to scream. Then the prince stepped back and turned to Della, as if just remembering he should care about her too. “Princess Cordelia. I am so relieved you are safe.”

He bowed over her hand. Della felt the slight but didn’t care about it.

“Sir Galeon is injured. She needs a physician,” Della said firmly, and the prince scowled.

“I’m fine, Your Highness,” Galeon protested poorly.

“What happened?” Prince Valin demanded.

“Griffin.” Galeon swayed into Sir Alvor.

“And I believe she hit her head,” Della said.

The prince led Della to his own horse, and she was too tired to object. It was only a short distance back to camp. When he pressed into her, she had to fight the urge to lean away.

She was glad to climb down when they reached the clearing, and followed alongside the rest as they entered a low tent where a physician attempted to assess an uncooperative Galeon.

“See to the princess,” Galeon panted as she tried to stand back up from where Sir Alvor had gently wrestled her onto a cot.

“See to Sir Galeon.” Della fixed the physician and Prince Valin with the most imperious look she could manage.

They both nodded.

Sir Alvor had already helped Galeon remove her damaged breastplate. When he peeled the chainmail shirt off her, Galeon’s calm cracked. She let

out a strangled sound as she raised her arms.

“Be careful!” the prince said, echoing Della’s own thoughts.

The physician shooed Sir Alvor away and took his place, pulling out a knife. Della’s heart irrationally spiked, but he just used it to efficiently slice through the laces down the front of Galeon’s sleeveless kirtle.

“Perhaps the princess should leave now,” the physician said.

Della narrowed her eyes at him, and he turned quickly back to his patient, lifting up the hem of the linen shirt.

Della did look away then. She wanted to see Galeon, but not like this. Not injured and vulnerable. Della didn’t think the proud woman would want that.

Galeon hissed and Prince Valin stiffened. “Careful!” he barked again.

“I must assess the injuries, Your Highness.”

Della watched from the corner of her eye as the physician moved Galeon’s arms, poked, and prodded. Galeon twitched and Della dared a quick glance. She couldn’t see much around the back of the physician, but dark color already bloomed along Galeon’s side, and Della thought she saw the edges of older scars as well. The physician briskly lowered the fabric of Galeon’s shirt and leaned over her head, bringing the flame of a candle close to her face, which she shied away from.

He stood, turning to Prince Valin. “She has at least three broken ribs and extensive bruising, and is rattled in the head. Everything is internal, and there is no treatment. Only time for the healing. Now, may I assess the princess?”

“There’s nothing you can do?” Della asked just as Prince Valin replied, “You can’t do anything?”

They shared a glance. In this, at least, they seemed compatible.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Then there will be nothing for you to help me with either. I have a few bruises but nothing more,” Della stated.

“Well, there is a poultice for bruises I could apply for you.”

“Then why can you not apply it to Sir Galeon?” Della disliked this man more with each moment.

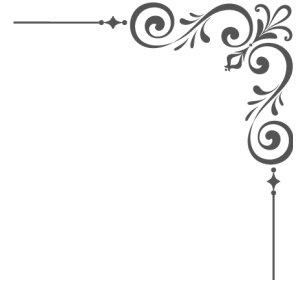
“If there is something to be done, do it,” the prince said harshly.

The physician simpered. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Galeon was staring at Della, but not at her eyes. Della glanced down at herself to see that a tear in her skirt was leaving a scandalous amount of her thigh exposed. Della wasn't sure if the dazed expression on Galeon's face was the head injury or desire. Perhaps a bit of both. Della shifted to give her a better view. Galeon's eyes sharpened. Definitely some desire.

Prince Valin was speaking to her, and Della made herself pay attention to him, accepting his arm and the promise of food and rest.

“Do what you can for Sir Galeon,” Della told the annoying physician. “If I am sufficiently satisfied with her care, then perhaps I may allow you to attend me.”



CHAPTER 11

THE HEALING OF BOOKS

Galeon stared up at her ceiling, pretending to relax. It had been two days since they'd returned from the unsuccessful hunt. Everyone had been eager to come back early after the near brush with the stampede.

Despite her protests, the prince had ordered Galeon to rest in her room. The physician had suggested ten days at least. Galeon had eventually agreed to five.

The others didn't seem to think the day of travel back to the palace counted. Galeon counted it. That meant she only had to get through two more.

The headaches were growing less intense while her ribs hurt worse than they had that first day. Just lying listlessly allowed the discomfort to overwhelm her without the purpose of action.

Galeon reached for the well-loved book yet again. She had read it through twice already since returning to the palace, but it was something to engage her mind so it did not dwell on green light and creamy thighs.

And yet the heroine of her story morphed into a tall woman with dark hair and a slightly crooked neck who wore gowns that were too snug.

Galeon sighed and closed the book with a snap. She felt like a youth again with her first unrequited crush on a girl. Only now Galeon's mind was more inventive and knowledgeable when crafting her fantasies.

Galeon gave herself a hard shake. She could only use her head injury as an excuse for so long.

The princess had saved her. She'd risked her own life for Galeon. Galeon couldn't quite remember what the princess had done, but knew she had used magic. And Galeon couldn't stand that. It didn't fit into her narrative of the world.

Rationally, Galeon knew not all witches were evil before they became consumed into malignants. But she had held on to the knowledge that soon they would become monsters, in order to stand proudly for her kingdom as it sentenced them.

It wasn't Galeon's place to decide a witch's fate. It wasn't Galeon's problem. Only now it was her problem because it was her secret too.

Magic was a plague on their land. It was the law to disclose a discovered witch. Galeon upheld the law.

Insidious doubts crept through her throbbing head.

A quiet knock sounded and Galeon sat up, stifling her grunt as she scooted to rest against the headboard. If her knights had to see her like this, she would at least meet them upright.

Sir Alvor opened the door. Galeon began to greet him, but when the princess walked inside, Galeon's words died and her whole body flooded with nerves and confusion.



"THANK YOU, SIR ALVOR. You may leave us," Della said and tried not to stare.

Della told herself she was checking on Galeon to ensure she was still keeping Della's secret. It wasn't because Della actually cared.

Galeon rested against the carved headboard of a narrow bed, wearing only a cream linen shirt with a deep neckline that exposed her bruised sternum. Galeon's fine, fair hair, which had always been slicked tightly back into a knot, fell loose to just past her open collar. She looked softer and more real like this.

Della had been correct in her assumption—Sir Galeon was just as stunning without her armor.

"How are you feeling?" Della asked.

"Much better," Galeon said unconvincingly.

Della glanced around the efficient room, noting the fine furnishings and plush rug beneath her feet. The evidence of the prince's favor was apparent.

"I'm afraid I don't ever have company in here," Galeon said, looking uncomfortable. "I only have the one chair." Della followed her gaze. By the window stood a table of dark wood with a single matching, straight-backed chair. "Here, let me—" Galeon shifted as if to stand.

Della stopped her with a firm hand on Galeon's shoulder. "Don't you dare."

They both froze.

The heat of Galeon's skin reached Della's through the thin fabric of her shirt. Della followed the swallow that traveled down Galeon's bare throat and noticed a locket on a simple chain resting in the hollow.

Della wanted to explore more with her eyes and her hands, but instead, she shifted the books she carried to one arm and dragged the chair over near the bed with the other.

"Thank you," Galeon said, and Della looked into her light brown eyes. "For what you did during the stampede. I believe I owe you my life."

"Only because you sacrificed it to save mine."

"I tried."

"You did. But as I said, I don't listen well."

Della smiled and Galeon cautiously returned it. The expression was slightly lopsided, curling more toward her unscarred cheek and doing unreasonable things to Della's belly. But Galeon's eyes also held questions Della didn't want to answer.

"I brought you some books," Della said, placing them on the bedside table. "I asked Sir Alvor to help me choose some you might like. I hope you do."

Several trinkets rested on the smooth wood surface near where she'd placed the books. A second locket on a broken chain, a half-charred wooden box, and a tiny sculpture of a house made of iron.

"Did you make this?" Della asked, indicating the metal sculpture.

Galeon nodded.

"May I?"

Galeon stared at the piece for a moment, and then nodded again.

Della shook the hem of her sleeve over her hand to protect her skin before she picked it up. It was as cold as expected, but had a nice weight. "This is beautiful."

“Thank you.”

“Was this your house?”

“No. It was a gift for someone a long time ago.”

“Who?”

Galeon’s eyes shifted from the metal house to Della’s gaze, and shone with both pain and pride. “My wife.”

“Oh.” Della’s stomach dropped and the hairs on her arms raised. “I did not realize you were married.”

“She died. Ten years ago.”

Della glanced at the charred box and broken locket. Had they also been hers? Galeon had said her village and home burned in the Uvarian war ten years ago. When Galeon had become a knight. Della’s chest tightened.

“I’m so sorry, Galeon.” Della reached out and took Galeon’s hand. It was a foolish impulse. They both looked down at where they touched, neither pulling away.

“When we married, I didn’t have anything other than the forge my father left me. We lived in a cramped room off the back. I promised her a house.” Galeon nodded to the sculpture in Della’s lap. “That was the best I could do for a wedding gift.”

Della was simultaneously honored to have heard that and wished she hadn’t. She carefully returned the house to its place on the table and withdrew her hand from Galeon’s. Then she cleared her suddenly full throat and reached for the books again.

“I brought you several to choose from,” Della said, handing them over.

“You’ve finished this one?” Galeon held up the green volume she had selected for Della, and Della tried not to squirm.

“No, I haven’t. I thought you might like to continue? Reading it together, I mean.”

Galeon sat up a bit straighter. “Very much.”

That response warmed Della’s insides and she smiled again as Galeon opened the book. Della leaned back in the chair that was designed to be

aesthetic and functional, if not comfortable. And she listened as Galeon began with chapter five, where they had left off before.

Della loved the sound of Galeon's voice. It was slightly husky, yet soft. The rhythm of her words as she read was unusual and haltingly lyrical. Della watched Galeon get sucked into the story, and then Della was drawn in again as well, and she forgot for a while where and who they were.

Della gasped aloud at the end of chapter six, when the hero of the story abandoned the heroine to the obvious villain. "What an ass!"

Galeon chuckled, which was cut short by a grimace of pain. "Just wait. There is a reason."

"What possible reason could excuse that? No, I don't believe in them. She should run off with the squire. Actually, no—the villain's sister."

"Wait for chapter ten," Galeon assured her.

A knock on the door announced Sir Alvor. "Is everything all right?" he asked. "You raised your voice."

"Everything is fine. Except for the hero of this story, who deserves a thrashing."

"Very good, Princess," Sir Alvor said with a faint smirk. "Shall I have a midday meal sent to you here, then?"

"Yes, do."

Sir Alvor backed out with a bow.

Galeon was watching Della intently.

"Unless you need to rest," Della said.

Galeon shook her head quickly. "I don't."

"Go on, then."

Galeon turned the page.



ANNET WAS LOUNGING on Della's bed, waiting for her. It was nearly sunset and Della was already overdue for dinner with the other nobles. She hesitated at the expression on her sister's face.

"Where have you been?" Annet demanded.

“With Sir Galeon.” Della tried to sound nonchalant as she pulled out an evening gown, but Annet knew her too well.

“You went to visit her this morning.” Annet narrowed her eyes, coming to take Della’s discarded day gown.

“Yes. And I just left.”

“And what were you doing there all day?” Annet looked almost betrayed.

“It doesn’t matter.” Della’s heart accelerated as she yanked the heavy, soft velvet over her head.

“Yes, it does.” Annet glared at her, snatching the simple pins from Della’s hair and grabbing jeweled ones from a box to replace them.

“You had your gorgeous cook, didn’t you?” Della shot back.

“It’s different.”

“How?”

“*You* are getting attached.”

Della’s fingers fumbled on the lacing of her bodice, and Annet’s hands replaced hers.

Annet was right. Against all her protesting, Della liked Galeon. Della hadn’t meant to. She also hadn’t told Annet the worst part—she hadn’t confessed that Galeon knew about her magic.

“Look, I know she’s pretty,” Annet said. “But we made a promise.”

Della turned and gripped Annet’s upper arms. “I know.” Della squeezed gently, making sure Annet met her eyes. “I know, Netty. And I won’t let anything keep me from fulfilling it.”

“Not even a pretty knight?”

“Not even a pretty knight.”

Annet nodded, and Della pulled her close. Annet hugged her back tightly.

“I’m just scared,” Annet whispered. “When I think about what might happen.”

“Me too.” Della’s eyes stung. “But don’t think about it, because that won’t happen. I promised. And I still promise.”

Annet wiped at her face and then shoved Della down onto the chair of the vanity. “You’re late. Let’s make you beautiful.”

“I already am beautiful.”

Della was rewarded with a watery eye roll as Annet brushed out her hair. “And was your knight at least as beautiful as you hoped?”

“We...we didn’t actually do anything. She just read to me.”

“Read? Like a book?”

“You’ve heard of them, right?” Della teased, and then her scalp paid for it. “Ouch!” Della laughed, trying to escape Annet’s vengeful fingers.

“How did you get both the princess role and the lady love who reads to you? This really wasn’t fair.”

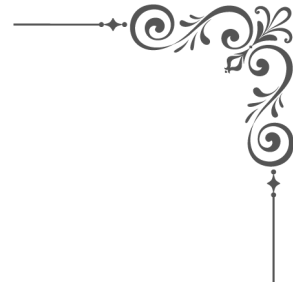
Della’s heart skipped. “I think the maid and the cook have a better chance at love than an engaged fake princess and an overly loyal knight.”

“Maybe. But love isn’t in either of our futures, is it?” Annet mused.

“No,” Della agreed. “It isn’t.”

They had always known it would be too difficult to hide their magic from a partner. But what if a partner already knew?

Della took that thought and balled it up before she stomped on it and set it on fire. If only Della could kill thoughts as easily as souls.



CHAPTER 12

BETTER THAN WINE

Galeon sat on the bench under the shade of a large tree. Her five days were up, and she wore her repaired armor again, if a bit looser than usual. Water rushed through the fountain nearby. It was peaceful and idyllic, but the gardens were not the loveliest thing occupying Galeon's attention today.

The princess wore deep, earthy burgundy, the silk more tempting than wine as it flowed over her. A flash of lace trimmed the neckline, drawing Galeon's eyes to places she tried desperately to avoid.

The princess crossed her arms, making Galeon's struggle much worse.

"I'm not convinced," the princess said. "I still think he's an ass, not a hero."

"But he had to do it in order for the plan to work."

"There were other ways. Or they could have just come up with a different plan. Couldn't they have sent a spy instead of her? Someone with actual training and experience and who knew what was happening?"

Galeon smiled. "Perhaps you should ask the author, Princess."

"Don't call me that."

"Don't call you what?"

"Princess. That's not my name."

"It is your title."

The princess shrugged. "Well, you use it too much."

Galeon felt off balance. Which was a common sensation around this woman. "What should I call you then?"

"Della."

"Princess Della."

Princess Della huffed out a laugh and shoved Galeon's shoulder, making Galeon's insides flutter and heat so she barely even noticed the pain. "No. Just Della."

“As you wish, Della.” The name rolled out of Galeon’s mouth, far too familiar and intimate. It was an unexpected shortening for Cordelia, but Galeon would call her anything she wished. Galeon cleared her throat as she closed the book. “We should head back inside so you can get ready for dinner.”

With the wedding approaching, soon the palace and city would be even more crammed with Glea nobles and visitors from other allied kingdoms, coming to pay respects, but mostly to avoid missing out on the spectacle and gossip of it all.

Galeon wondered who might be participating in the upcoming tournament. Her damaged ribs ached in protest at the thought. Too bad for them, Galeon wasn’t planning on sitting it out.

Galeon managed to stand up without grimacing, and then offered her arm to Della as they made their slow way up through the garden to the palace. Galeon cursed her body’s reaction to the touch she couldn’t even feel. Heat traveled up her arm, spread across her chest, and burrowed lower. What would it be like to feel Della’s hands following that path?

A squawk interrupted Galeon’s inappropriate thoughts.

“Ferno!” Della cooed.

A young phoenix waddled toward them along the path. He’d doubled in size since they had released him, and he flapped excitedly but wasn’t quite ready to fly yet. He marched up to Galeon and stared at her expectantly. When Galeon didn’t immediately do what he wanted, the bird slammed his beak into Galeon’s foot. It would have probably hurt, if Galeon’s boots hadn’t been capped with metal.

Della laughed and Galeon bent awkwardly, scratching the newly glossy plumage around the bird’s neck. It seemed to appease him, his eyes squinting in pleasure.

“Little traitor,” Della muttered as the bird tired of the attention and wandered off. “You feed him once, and now he likes you better.”

“It’s just my natural charm.” Galeon grunted as she struggled to straighten, her ribs pinching and stabbing, until Della helped. “Thanks.”

“That must be it,” Della agreed.

“I was being ironic.”

“Well, I wasn’t.” Della held her gaze.

They were far too close, Della’s body pressing into Galeon’s side and her arm around Galeon’s waist. Galeon cleared her throat and stepped back.

“I want to know what happens,” Della said as they started walking again, glancing at the book she carried. “Do you think we can finish it tonight?”

Galeon’s stomach tightened at the thought of shutting themselves up in a candlelit room together again. It was a most enticingly terrible idea. She should say no.

“Perhaps.”



WINE COATED DELLA’S mouth as she swallowed more than she should. She was seated in the banquet hall between Prince Valin and Lady Clayton.

Lady Clayton was beautiful in the way a good painting was, effortless and yet carefully done. Her laugh tinkled. Della had never met someone who could do that.

“You look so different now, Princess Cordelia—I hardly recognize you,” Lady Clayton said, her voice soft and melodic, but her words chilling. They sluiced over Della like a bucket of springtime river water.

Della forced her face to remain calm as her heart raced. She had known it couldn’t truly be so easy as the real princess claimed. Someone had finally recognized the charade. The safety of her current position was all an illusion, and Della had been a fool to believe it even for a moment.

“Well, it was so long ago,” Lady Clayton added. “We were no more than girls when you visited us in Alludan. But I recall our time fondly, of course.”

“As do I,” Della lied swiftly. “You look better than ever. That shade of pink is perfect for you.” Della hoped flattery would redirect the woman’s attention. And the comment about the color, at least, was true.

Lady Clayton blushed prettily and swept Della with an appraising eye. “Your gown is lovely as well. I am eager for your fashion sense from Hevalon to reach here.”

Della glanced down at the ill-fitted gown that showed too much skin. Words were such poor tools to tell what someone was thinking. Della could not discern if Lady Clayton was being genuine, flirtatious, or carefully threatening.

“How have you been since I saw you last?” Della asked, going with the lie.

“Well, I caught myself a husband.” Lady Clayton waved dismissively at the man sitting on the prince’s other side. Then she laughed, glancing admiringly at Della’s betrothed. “Not as fine as yours, of course. Is it just a dream to be living together in the palace?”

Della’s favorite times in this palace had been in the company of her clanking shadow. Her eyes sought out Galeon, who stood against the wall. Galeon raised an eyebrow in silent question, and Della smiled in reassurance before turning back to Lady Clayton.

“The palace is indeed lovely,” Della settled on.

“Did my cousin Lady Sophia write to you often of her time here? We all had such fun that summer.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Though I believe she was rather busy,” Della guessed, having no idea who this other lady was.

Lady Clayton’s glittering laugh chimed loudly as she gave Della a surprised, secretive look. “Yes, I believe she was.” The lady glanced again at Prince Valin, and then she leaned even closer. “As I understand it, you will be a lucky bride.”

Della raised an eyebrow. Had Princess Cordelia’s friend been the prince’s lover? Perhaps that was why the princess had not wanted to come here. Then Della came to the alarming realization that this Lady Sophia might try to attend the wedding. Before Della could think of how to subtly ask for more information, Lady Clayton’s face fell.

“It was such a sad day when we got the news. What a terrible way to die. I may not be able to bring myself to board a ship ever again.”

“Yes, I feel the same,” Della agreed, trying to catch up with the knowledge that the lady existed and had apparently already drowned. Della shouldn’t feel glad about it, but it was a relief to know she wouldn’t be turning up.

Lady Clayton blinked rapidly and sipped at her wine, and then fixed a brighter expression on her elegant face. “Let us talk of something happier. Have you taken advantage of the palace library? I hear it is excellent.”

“It is.” Della drained her wine. When the server came by to refill it, Della let him.

“What are some of your favorite works? Do you still read as much now as you did back then?”

“These days I am partial to novels. With happy endings.”

It was the truth. Della wanted to be back in her room—or really, anywhere—reading with Galeon. Doing anything with Galeon.

Lady Clayton leaned in to whisper conspiratorially, so close that Della couldn’t smell anything other than rosewater. “I heard a rumor that a murder happened in the library!”

“I’m not sure if the murder itself was there, but the body definitely was.” Della was glad they had returned to a topic Della enjoyed. Death, Della knew plenty about. Her wine was gone again already.

Lady Clayton’s eyes widened. “So it’s true?”

Della wondered if she shouldn’t have said that. She glanced at Galeon, but Galeon couldn’t hear their conversation, and the prince wasn’t paying them any attention. She shrugged. “It’s very true. I saw it.”

“How horrid!” Lady Clayton exclaimed but her eyes sparkled with curiosity, and Della found she liked her a bit more for it. Della did not detect suspicion, and she relaxed. “Will you show me the place and tell me everything? I would love to rekindle our acquaintance.”

The brief warmth of a friendly connection withered. Even in this false life, friends were dangerous. Della couldn’t forget that.

“I will ask Sir Galeon if that is allowed.”

Lady Clayton's brow wrinkled in delicate confusion. "Sir Galeon? Oh, your guard?"

"She is head of the prince's guard," Della said, feeling the need to correct the woman.

"Why would you need to ask her? Surely you can do as you wish here."

Della shrugged again.

The room quieted when Prince Valin stood. "Welcome, friends from near and far. I want to thank you all for joining us to celebrate my upcoming marriage to the beautiful Princess Cordelia."

Quiet applause rippled around them, and Della met Prince Valin's gaze as he looked down at her. There was no spark between them. There was simply...nothing. Perhaps that was Della's fault, but it didn't matter.

The prince spoke and Della pretended to listen. More wine disappeared.

When Della met Galeon's gaze, warmth flooded Della's whole body. Della wanted her. In her arms, and in her bed. She wanted their quiet moments together, and the restrained heat in Galeon's eyes. That too was dangerous. But perhaps, on further reflection, a little danger wasn't so bad.

The prince finished his speech, and everyone resumed conversation. None of it interested Della.

"Excuse me," Della said to no one in particular, pushing her chair back.

The prince frowned at her early departure, but he bid her good night. Lady Clayton smiled at the prince, sliding over to take Della's place. Della didn't care. She took Galeon's arm and they left the room.

As soon as they were in the quiet hall, Della sighed. The flames in the braziers flickered more than usual and the walls blurred.

"Are you well?" Galeon wrapped a hasty arm around Della's waist.

"Just a bit tipsy, I think." Della was unused to drinking much. Apparently, several goblets of wine were several too many.

"I've got you."

They made their way back to Della's tower, carefully climbing the stairs. When they reached the top, Della swayed into Galeon, leaning against her cold chest. Della rested her palm on Galeon's jaw, needing to feel skin again.

Galeon sucked in a breath. "It's late."

"Actually, it's quite early. Read to me."

"...I don't think I should, Della."

Hearing her name on Galeon's lips sent a thrill of pleasure through Della and she pressed closer. She wanted Galeon's arms to close around her again, but they hung stiffly at Galeon's sides.

"Please?" Della asked.

Galeon sighed. "One chapter."

Della grinned in triumph.

"But we both sit by the fire," Galeon stated.

Della curled up in the corner of the sofa, kicking off her shoes and tucking her feet beneath her as she patted the seat beside her. "Fine. But you sit here with me."

Galeon hesitated, but then braced her hand on the other armrest and carefully lowered herself. Della frowned. It was so easy to forget that Galeon had been injured.

"You are in pain. We don't have to read tonight if you need rest."

Galeon gave her a tilted smile. "I would be resting by standing at the foot of your stairs. So this is better." Della still frowned, and Galeon's smile turned softer. "Don't worry. The prince is having someone set up a mortifying cot in the hall. It is the compromise for letting me out of my room."

Della wanted to argue that she knew of a wonderfully soft bed that was plenty large enough for two. But she knew Galeon wouldn't be moved, and she liked that she knew that, even if she didn't like the conclusion.

Galeon opened the book, and Della became swept away in the story of the hero who was an ass and a heroine who was inept. And Della loved every moment.



DELLA WRESTLED WITH the scrap of fabric in the candlelight. After pulling a blue thread too impatiently, it had snarled with the yellow, and now that section was thick, resisting the needle as she tried to stab it through again.

She'd been sewing all her life, but the practical sort. She could mend or alter anything. But creating a pleasing pattern with multiple colors and threads was something else entirely. Princesses were skilled at needlework, and while Della had the time and resources of one, she thought she would try. Over the past two weeks since the hunt, she had created three atrocious rags. But it occupied her hands and kept her from wandering down and bothering the knight who took up too much space in her mind.

"Della!"

Annet's cry startled Della and she stabbed herself with the needle. She sucked on the bead of blood blooming on the pad of her un-thimble finger, ready to tease Annet for injuring her, but the amusement died when she saw her sister's face.

"What is wrong?" Della stood, her finger and the scrap of embroidery forgotten.

"There's been an accident."

"What sort of accident?" Della's gut clenched.

"In the stables. A boy was trampled. They've done what they can, but he isn't doing well. Will you come?"

"Annet..."

"Please. He's just a boy."

Della looked into her sister's pinched, worried face. "I may not be able to help," Della warned.

"Will you try?"

Della nodded and followed.

"What is happening?" Galeon asked, falling into step with them as they left the tower.

Della didn't answer, nor did Annet elaborate as the three of them made their way to the servants' wing.

Nods, bows, and murmurs of "Princess," rippled behind them. Della found herself uncomfortable being in their space. She felt out of place, like she really was a princess. But she didn't have time to dwell on that unsettling realization as they stopped in a dim room off the end of a hallway.

A small, deathly white figure lay in a narrow bed. He was indeed young, likely not much more than twelve years old. A woman with matching honey-colored hair sat in a chair beside him, the weight of grief drooping her frame as she held a limp hand.

She glanced up when they entered, and Della recognized her as the fetching maid who had brought her drinks her second night in the palace. But the woman wasn't looking at Della.

"You came," she murmured, her eyes fixed on Galeon.

"What happened?" Galeon asked, moving forward and crouching in front of the woman. "Viv?"

"The physician just left. Said he's not going to make it through the night."

Della and Annet exchanged a look.

"What is she doing here?" Viv asked faintly, finally noticing Della.

"I asked her to come," Annet said.

"Oh. Thank you, Princess," Viv said weakly, her gaze skittering back to Galeon.

"What is his name?" Della asked as she approached the bed.

"Sid. My baby brother."

"I will sit with Sid for a while. You should rest."

Viv shook her head. "I will not leave him."

Della understood the fear in Viv's eyes, and admired her defiance. But Della hardened her heart against it. She needed the woman to leave. "Just for a moment or two. Get some fresh air." Della looked at Galeon. "I'd like time with Sid. Alone."

Galeon watched her intently. And Della waited, holding her breath, for Galeon to decide if she would help her.

Galeon took Viv's hands and pulled her up.

"No," Viv pleaded. She looked at Galeon as if Galeon could fix it.

"Just for a moment," Galeon said, wrapping an arm around her. Galeon met Della's gaze, and Della saw a warning there.

Viv returned the hug and allowed Galeon to lead her out of the room.

The interaction had Della's green monster of jealousy raising its head. How well did they know each other? Then she shook herself. Now was not the time for that.

"You should leave as well," Della told Annet, who scowled at her. But Galeon didn't know that Annet knew. And Annet didn't know that Galeon did either. "Make sure they don't come back before I'm done."

"You'll be all right?"

"I always am."

As Annet closed the door firmly behind her, Della focused on Sid. The boy's soul was wavering, nearly detached. It remained connected to his body by only a thread. If she did nothing, it would soon slip away. Quiet and natural.

Della reached out and grasped it.

As soon as her fingers closed, something like a voice, but so much more enchanting, started to sing through her. It didn't speak words, but she understood the call. The desire to give in. To come home. It would be so easy. All she had to do was let the magic take control and everything would be right.

Della started to lower her hand, but then she hesitated. The call sounded odd. Deeper. Like it wasn't someone else calling, but Della herself.

The veins of magic inside her pulsed. Fear and delicious power flowed through her.

The soul in her hand was so charming. So delicate. She wanted it.

Della pressed down firmly, reattaching it, and her hand over Sid's small chest glowed brightly.

The boy stirred, his eyelids fluttering as Della took several steps away, her breath coming in too fast.

Something was different. Something must have happened when she'd drawn magic into her to repair the griffin soul. The lies didn't feel so much like lies anymore.

Della shook herself. Nothing had changed. She had resisted, as always. She had promised.

She tapped on the door and Annet slipped back inside, drawing a shaky Della into a tight hug. Della clung to Annet but kept her eyes on the boy.

"Thank you," Annet whispered.

It was a risky and potentially pointless thing to do. Della could have chastised her sister for being the one to get attached this time.

"It might not stick," Della reminded her instead.

Sid's young body was still just as damaged as it had been. They would have to see if it could hold on to the second chance Della had given it.

Was it the right thing to do? Della wasn't sure. But the look on Viv's face when she returned to find Sid awake made it feel worth it.

Or it would simply give Viv false hope and break her heart all over again.

These were the times when Della hated her magic the most. Having the power to do something meant she had the ability to choose wrong.

As Viv began to openly weep, Della turned away. She had seen enough. Done enough.

"Will you stay?" Della asked Annet. Then Della fled.



GALEON TRAILED DELLA back through the halls, her chest painfully constricted. Grief always ripped open memories Galeon knew she would never fully recover from. But Viv might not need to grieve long.

"What did you do?" Galeon whispered.

“Not here.”

Galeon passed the base of the steps and followed Della up into her tower.

“You healed him?” Galeon asked. “With your magic?” The words felt nonsensical as they passed her lips. Galeon should be disgusted at herself for allowing Della to use magic in the palace. But how could she be?

“Something like that.”

“Will he recover?”

“I don’t know. But at least he has a chance.”

“How much does your maid know?”

Della threw Galeon a sharp look. “Annet has nothing to do with my magic. She knows I have talents, but not the particulars.”

“And what are those talents, exactly?”

Galeon had asked that night in the forest, but Della had never answered the question. And it didn’t seem she would now either.

Della started to pace.

Galeon reached out and caught Della’s wringing hands, stilling her. They both stared at where they touched, and then Della curled her fingers around Galeon’s, holding tight.

“Thank you,” Galeon said, and Della finally met her gaze. “For whatever it was you did.”

“Don’t thank me yet.”

Galeon shook her head, thinking of Viv again. “Thank you.”

Della’s eyes fell back to their hands. “You know Viv?”

“I do.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“How well do you know her?”

Was Della jealous? “Are you asking if we are lovers?”

Della raised her eyes again. “I suppose I am.”

Della was jealous. A thrill rushed through Galeon, mixing with discomfort. “No. She is a friend.”

They stood there for the longest time, counting breaths, hands clasped. Della’s hands were not as soft as Galeon would have expected. It was another incongruity to the woman, and one which delighted Galeon for some reason. Healing calluses lined Della’s palms and fingers. Galeon brazenly traced the edge of one.

Della was the one to pull away. Galeon had the terrible desire to reach for her again, but there would be no excuse for such an act.

“How are you feeling?” Galeon asked, noting that the color had returned to Della’s cheeks.

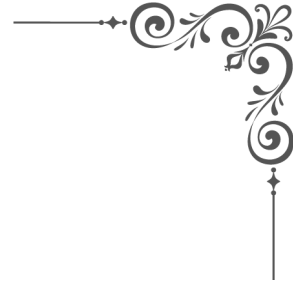
“Better now.”

“Good. Well.” Galeon barely heard her own words as blood rushed in her ears. “It’s getting late.”

“Yes.”

Galeon should go. She had no plausible reason to still be there. “Good night, Della.”

“Good night, Galeon.”



CHAPTER 13

NOT SO INNOCENT

Before she opened her eyes, Della knew something was wrong.

The magic slithered through her veins, itching her skin and trying to escape. Whispering. Tempting.

She needed to purge. Again. Usually, Della could last several months between purges. But it had only been weeks.

The magic had grown more each day since she'd resisted it. Young Sid was hanging on three days after her interference. Della still wasn't convinced she'd done the right thing. Had she only prolonged his suffering?

She could fix it, if she just gave in.

Della angrily shoved the lies away and climbed out of bed. She needed to find Galeon.

It had been nearly three weeks since Galeon had learned the truth. And the strangest thing was, Della was beginning to believe she would keep Della's secret. Della had never been able to trust another person with it before, except for Annet. Galeon had not broken that fragile trust yet, and Della would need to lean on it a bit more.

She descended the stairs in the early morning, already struggling to keep her glow tamped down. She found Galeon seated at the base of her stairs. Della knew Galeon returned to sleep in her own room most nights, but Della so rarely encountered anyone else on her stairs, it was difficult to believe.

Galeon had done away with the cot, despite Della's insistence to keep using it. Apparently, Galeon didn't listen well either. Not when she thought she could get away with it.

Galeon was obnoxiously loyal and equally stubborn. She was subtly opinionated and always dependable. Many things about Galeon confused Della. Most of all, how much Della liked her. How much Della wanted to see her all the time. Galeon had become one of the first things Della

thought of when she woke, and definitely the only thing she thought of in bed alone each night.

Light brown eyes looked up at Della and inviting lips curved into a reflexive smile. Della wanted to lean down and taste that slightly crooked mouth. She very nearly did, the magic tugging her to do it. Della moved back, refocusing on the very reason she was seeking Galeon at such an unreasonable hour.

“What is it?” Galeon asked, and she barely winced as she stood, her ribs mostly healed.

“I need your help,” Della whispered, glancing around the deserted hallway.

“Anything,” Galeon promised and Della’s belly swooped. “What do you need?”

“To purge.” Della held her breath, waiting for Galeon’s reaction.

Galeon nodded. “So, what do you need?”

“A place where light cannot escape, and sound is preferably muffled. Perhaps a cellar?”

Della couldn’t reveal Annet had told her of one without exposing her and her knowledge too. Della may have been forced to trust Galeon with her own safety, but she would trust no one with Annet’s.

“Follow me.”

Galeon led Della along quiet halls and into the belly of the palace, down a twisting flight of stairs to unused rooms that required a torch to see through the darkness.

Della didn’t notice the inset door on the wall until Galeon reached it, lifting a latch hiding near the top and ducking through it. They had to turn sideways to fit past the narrow opening, squeezing along a passage that led to another door.

A surprisingly large room stood inside, furnished well, as a guest room might be, but without any windows or natural light.

“What is this place?” Della asked.

“A safe room. No one will be able to see or hear anything.”

“Perfect.”

They watched each other.

“I will be in the connecting hall. Just in case,” Galeon finally said.

“If I scream, don’t listen.” Galeon’s face darkened and Della raised her chin. “I will let you know when I’m done.”



GALEON LEFT THE TORCH with Della, closing the door and shutting herself in the dark, cramped passageway. Tension tightened her shoulders as she listened. Waited.

This was beyond illegal. She was breaking more than one of her vows as a knight. But she’d been enabling a witch for weeks, so what was a bit more treason?

Galeon had also vowed to protect the princess. And she would. At any cost.

This way might not be honest, but it kept everyone most safe.

Galeon knew she was rationalizing, but she didn’t care, because she couldn’t stomach another option.

Her skin pricked as it started. The thick door obscured much of the sound, but the quiet cracking and faint pulse of green light found the seams in the wood to reach her. It wouldn’t be noticeable from the main hall, but right outside the door, Galeon felt it.

Galeon stood there, listening to her own breath and the bone-chilling sounds from the room beyond. It went on too long. When a muffled cry rang out, it took everything in her not to barge back inside.

She needed to do something. She needed to help. She needed to take the pain away and banish the magic from Della. But she couldn’t.

Galeon had always been dedicated to her job, but this was more. Because Della wasn’t a job anymore.

It was too soon, and incomprehensible, but Galeon knew what love was. She still held it for Lillian, though it was a softer, more abstract feeling as the clear memories of her grew farther away.

What Galeon felt for Della was different—potent and consuming—and yet familiar. And it would remain unrequited. She couldn't cross that line, not with Della. Not with her future queen. Not with the prince's bride.

But she wanted to.

Parts of Galeon stood in the darkness of that hall and wanted to utterly forsake her vows. They would run away together. Take new names in a foreign kingdom. Galeon would return to blacksmithing. Della would—

Della would never want that life. She didn't seem to think less of Galeon for her humble past, but that didn't mean the princess would accept such a future. Galeon hadn't even been able to fulfill her promise to Lillian for a simple home. What could she offer Della other than a life of poverty in hiding?

Galeon and Della both had responsibilities here. Galeon would do well to remember that.

Several heartbeats passed without any sound or light. Galeon pressed her ear to the door. Was it over? She didn't hear anything.

"Della?" Galeon called softly.

When there was no answer, a terrible coil of dread filled Galeon. She opened the door.

Della was lying on the floor, unmoving. As Galeon rushed to her, Della's eyes fluttered, but they didn't open.

"Della." Galeon cupped her face and brushed damp strands of hair away as she hauled Della into her arms.

The position felt hauntingly familiar. Like the final time Galeon had held Lillian. When Galeon had failed her.

Galeon's arms tightened, crushing Della to her chest.

Della stirred, snuggling closer. Galeon's chest relaxed but her arms didn't. She cursed her armor for keeping them apart. A clammy hand reached up and fingers threaded beneath the knot of hair at Galeon's nape.

Contact had seemed to help Della last time. So Galeon made contact, sweeping a tentative hand over Della's soft hair, over her shoulder and her

upper back. Galeon's heartbeat quickened. This wasn't entirely selfless, but she kept her touches innocent. As innocent as they could be.

Della's dark eyes blinked open. Then she smiled and nuzzled into Galeon's neck.

Galeon cherished this. It was twisted to do so, but Galeon did anyway. This might be the only time she got to hold Della.

Galeon saw their lives stretching before them—Della relying on Galeon to sneak away and keep her secret, and Galeon being there to help her recover. The thought was sickening and comforting at the same time, and Galeon knew she would do it. For as long as Della needed her, Galeon would be there.

She vowed it.



MIDAFTERNOON SUN SHONE through Della's windows. She pushed herself up in bed, groggy and achy as she surfaced from the undertow of sleep. She didn't remember much since the purging. It had been a particularly brutal one. She thought she recalled Galeon holding her and helping her back to her room.

Galeon.

Della's heart thumped twice. Della hadn't thanked her. She should thank her. Mostly, she just wanted to see her.

As Della moved, her weariness faded. Her energy returned in the wake of the magic, leaving a lightness in her chest and a bounce in her steps as she descended the stairs, a smile already forming in greeting.

It wasn't Galeon who stood at the base of her steps. Two other knights waited there.

"Where is Sir Galeon?" Della asked.

"She is in the stables, Princess."

"The stables?"

"Readying her mount and equipment for the tournament."

"Oh, yes. Of course."

Della flushed with embarrassment. She'd been so wrapped up in her own worries she had forgotten tomorrow was a big day for Galeon.

"Take me there," Della directed, and raised her chin.

The knight bowed and led the way. "Are you excited for the tournament, Princess?"

"I am. Are either of you participating?" Della asked as they walked, eyeing the two rugged knights. Neither compared to Galeon, but Della doubted any could.

"Sir Daric will be," the older knight said, nodding to the younger, who blushed under Della's appraising eyes. "I am a bit old to recover from such a thing."

"Will it be dangerous?" Della asked, concern filling her chest at the thought of Galeon being hurt.

"It always is, though no one has died for a while, as I recall."

That wasn't much comfort.

The stables were housed in an oversized structure off the side of the main palace courtyard. As they crossed the threshold of the wide-open doors, the sounds and smells of animals and people rushing in a flurry of activity and excitement greeted them. Colorful banners, barding, and saddles littered the floor, and more were thrown over stall walls.

Galeon was near the rear of the building, the presence of horse and straw pungent as they approached. She was working with a young woman in a squire's tunic who was helping fit a white caparison over the back of a huge black stallion. It was not the creature Galeon had ridden during the hunt.

Galeon didn't notice them until Sir Daric cleared his throat loudly.

"Is everything all right?" Galeon asked, concern in her eyes as she looked at Della, then between the other knights.

"Everything is fine," Della said, trying to reassure her and answer the unasked question in her eyes. "I just wanted to see the stables. Is this your mount?"

“One of them. But keep your distance.” Galeon stepped between Della and the tall creature. “He isn’t friendly.”

Della looked into the glittering eyes that glared back. The horse’s nostrils flared as he scented her and let out a gruff snort, his ears going flat.

“Being friendly isn’t his job, is it?” Della pointed out.

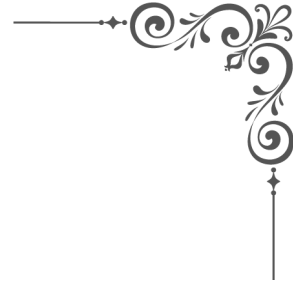
Galeon gave her a small smile. “No.”

“You are really going to compete tomorrow, then?”

“I am recovered enough.” Galeon’s expression hardened into the stubborn one Della was learning to recognize.

Della nodded. “Then I expect you to win.”

Galeon’s smile returned and her eyes flickered. “As you wish, Princess.”



CHAPTER 14

THE PRINCESS'S FAVORITE

The air hummed with anticipation.

Della sat on a high-backed throne beside Prince Valin as her tournament began. The arena had been erected in a field just across the northern bridge to the city. The palace provided a dramatic backdrop with the mountains rising behind.

Viewing stands surrounded the large oval clearing, and tents sprawled beyond. Della and the other nobles were shielded in private covered boxes, protected from both the rising sun and throngs of citizens who jostled, waiting for the entertainment to begin.

The cheering grew deafening as the first of the mounted knights marched into the arena. Clad in full armor and displaying the colors of their houses, they filed in. Della counted at least forty as she searched for Galeon.

Della's stomach swooped when she saw her. Though Galeon was wearing a helmet that obscured her face, she was still gorgeous. She was one of a handful of knights who did not display a house color. Instead, her mount was draped in the white Della had seen yesterday, to signify her house as that of the prince.

Della thought Galeon looked up at her, but then Della rolled her eyes at herself. All the knights were looking at them. This was in her honor, after all.

"Your Highnesses! And citizens of Glorious Glea!" called a thin man with a booming voice, waving from the center of the arena and commanding everyone's attention. He had to wait for the cheers of the crowd to die down.

"In honor of the upcoming royal marriage, we have organized a tournament for our finest knights. It is a contest of strength, grit, and skill, to demonstrate our kingdom's great might and impress upon the world, and our future queen—" The announcer swept an exaggerated bow toward Della. "—our ability to protect and serve her honorably. There will be three challenges."

The announcer held up three fingers, his gestures dramatic and engaging, more for the stands of spectators than for Della.

“First up, the joust! This is the most dangerous of the tasks and only those with enough skill to avoid the lance—or enough grit to take it—will continue on.

“Next will be a test of strength, where only those who can cross the finish line will be allowed to take part in the final challenge: hand-to-hand combat with the weapon of their choosing.”

The announcer paused again for the roar of the crowd.

“And what is it these knights are competing for? The winner will earn the honor to sit beside Princess Cordelia at tonight’s banquet. And, of course, a great fortune!”

More cheers and a few jeers and lewd calls. Della kept her chin held high. So, she was the prize, then? She glanced at Prince Valin beside her, who was scowling. He beckoned to a well-dressed man nearby.

“Did you arrange that? Why was I not consulted? Shouldn’t the groom sit beside his bride at the banquet?” Sharpness edged each question.

“It is tradition, Your Highness,” the man said with a bow. “It has always been done so. Sir Daric’s father sat beside your mother.”

Prince Valin did not look happy. “And that turned out splendidly, didn’t it. Well, it’s done now, I suppose.”

Della wasn’t any more pleased about this detail. She didn’t particularly want to sit beside the prince, but neither did she enjoy the feeling of being auctioned off. There was only one person she hoped to be sitting beside tonight.

“May I present your knights!” The announcer in the arena began going down the line.

It took a long time as he read out the titles and families. Each knight moved forward and rode a ring around the arena, accepting applause and a few tokens of favor from those in the crowd, then approaching the royal box. Della followed Prince Valin’s lead and nodded to each.

When young Sir Daric came by, Della smiled at him, and he turned pink beneath the open visor of his helmet.

Galeon was toward the end.

“Sir Galeon, Original Knight of Glea, and Head of His Highness Prince Valin’s Personal Guard!”

Galeon fell out of line, her bright armor and pale colors stark against her surly black stallion. She rode confidently around the stadium, pausing as someone leaned over the barricade from the stands. Della thought she recognized the honey shade of hair that belonged to Viv. Viv tied a pink ribbon around Galeon’s wrist.

Jealousy flashed through Della, green and vicious like the magic that coursed through her blood, as a second strange woman flagged Galeon down and offered up a yellow ribbon. Della didn’t want Galeon wearing another woman’s favor.

“Who is that?” Della asked Prince Valin.

“Who?” His eyes dragged upward to her face. He hadn’t been paying attention to the arena.

“Never mind,” Della muttered.

Galeon accepted another two favors from the crowd, each one adding a slap to Della’s face. Della shouldn’t hate those women or the charming scraps of fabric. But she did.

Della had not brought any favor to bestow, but she wouldn’t let that minor detail stop her. She tugged loose the green ribbon securing her long sleeve as Galeon approached.

The crowd quieted when Della stood and stepped up to the wooden railing of the box. Della was near eye level with Galeon astride her tall mount. She had also opened her visor so Della could see part of her face. Della wanted to see more.

“Will you accept my favor, Sir Galeon?” Della asked, meeting light brown eyes.

“With the highest honor,” Galeon replied, her expression and tone serious.

Della reached for Galeon, tying the ribbon around her metal-clad bicep, trying to ignore the other colors on Galeon's arm.

"You promised to win," Della murmured, holding Galeon's gaze. "I don't want to sit beside a stranger tonight."

"As you wish, Princess."

Galeon inclined her head in a bow to Della, then the prince, and rode onward.

"You shouldn't show favorites," Prince Valin said as Della returned to her seat.

Della shrugged. "But she is my favorite."

"Mine too. But we shouldn't show it so publicly."

Della shrugged again. "Well, I did."

The prince narrowed his eyes. "Will you be this willful as a wife?"

Della stiffened. "Definitely. If you wanted an obedient one, you should have chosen differently."

"I didn't choose," Prince Valin said harshly.

"Neither did I."

They stared at each other, and then both looked away as the next knight approached their box.



THE CROWD CHEERED AS the first pair of knights started off the joust, echoing over the tents and reaching Galeon where she waited.

A hulking knight wearing black and gold beneath her filigreed armor approached. "You caused quite the stir out there."

Galeon's face pulled into a smile as she greeted the older woman, accepting the hearty hug Sir Regina offered. "I thought you retired."

"It turns out, retirement is incredibly boring. Doesn't pay much either. A great fortune never hurt anyone, right?"

"I'm fairly sure it has."

"Ah well. It's worth the risk then." Sir Regina's dark hair was streaked with gray, and the lines around her mouth were etched with use as she

smirked. “You’ve done well for yourself.”

Sir Regina’s eyes fell to the ribbons on Galeon’s arm. Galeon wanted to remove them, except for one. She could almost feel the green ribbon through her armor. She wasn’t sure she’d ever take it off. Her heart swelled with pride. The prince had clearly disapproved of the open favor, but Galeon couldn’t muster up any regret.

“I have been given the honor of being the princess’s personal guard,” Galeon explained, trying not to sound defensive.

“Is that so?”

Galeon nodded firmly, turning her attention to listening, trying to hear over the roar of what was happening in the arena.

“Better gird your loins,” Sir Regina muttered. “Here comes Sir Ball Sack.”

Galeon snorted. She generally disapproved of such taunts, but in this case, it was fitting. She had to stop her teeth from grinding as another knight in sky blue joined them.

“Sir Ballany,” Galeon greeted tersely.

The man sneered. “Sir Galeon. I am surprised the prince let you compete in this tournament.”

Galeon kept her expression blank as she met the man’s eyes. “And why would you say that?”

“Everyone knows you are his favorite. And the princess’s now too, it seems. Tell me, what is it like to be so...lovable?”

Galeon casually rested her hand on the hilt of her sword, very aware of many ears and eyes on them.

“Such a shame our kingdom has had to resort to this,” Sir Ballany continued with a sigh. “Polluting the royal line with Hevalon blood.”

Someone nearby made a small noise of agreement. Galeon whipped her head around and pinned him with a look. He paled, looking down.

“That Hevalon blood you speak of is your future queen,” Galeon bit. “So watch your words, sir.”

Sir Ballany just smiled an oily smile. "I'm glad you've been able to cope so well with your own disappointment, Gal. That the prince did not choose someone...closer to home?"

"He has made an excellent choice," Galeon gritted out, not missing his use of the prince's name for her.

"That's right." Sir Ballany snickered. "But of course, you would approve. It will be so convenient for you, after the wedding. When the royal couple will share only one room."

Galeon struggled to remain calm as the eavesdropping knights around them shifted loudly. She'd heard the insinuation countless times about the nature of her relationship with the prince. It was easier to brush off those comments because they held no truth. But with Della, there was so much more. Fear beaded between Galeon's shoulder blades, and her blood rushed stronger, her body tensing.

Sir Regina folded her large arms. "Shut that foul mouth of yours or I will shut it for you," she said from beside Galeon.

Sir Ballany curled his thin lip, ignoring Sir Regina. "I'm dying to know, Galeon, since you are the expert. Which royal bed is softer?"

Galeon had moved before she processed what she was doing. Her hand curled around Sir Ballany's stubbly jaw, squeezing too tight as she leaned close to his face.

"How dare you insult her. You forget, sir, who the fuck I am."

Alarm flickered in the man's ugly eyes.

"I would call you out right now, but I will do that soon in the arena. And when I crush you in front of everyone, you will know it is for her."

Galeon released him roughly, shoving him away. He stumbled back and tripped. No one moved to help him. Fury boiled in Galeon.

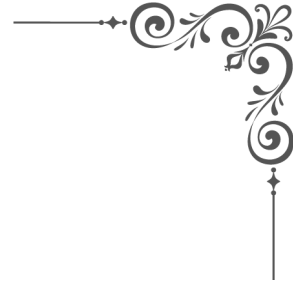
Sir Ballany recovered his arrogant smirk. "Well, I think I just got my answer."

"Forget him. He's not worth it," Sir Regina said, stepping in front of Galeon to prevent her from pursuing the horrid man as he slunk away. "I'm going up soon. Walk there with me? I want to show you my new

steed.” Galeon allowed Sir Regina to drape a large arm around her shoulders. “Everyone knows Sir Ballany, and what he’s like. Don’t pay him any attention.”

Galeon’s heart hammered. The thought of Sir Ballany sitting beside Della tonight made Galeon’s fists clench.

She wouldn’t allow that to happen.



CHAPTER 15

A DANGEROUS CHILD

The crunching splinter of a wooden lance striking metal echoed over the crowd before the cheer drowned it out.

Della thought of Galeon's still-healing ribs and felt sick.

She did her best to ignore the surly prince by her side, watching the heats of knights face off in the joust. Each time a new set entered, Della looked for a flash of white and silver on a black stallion.

It seemed to take forever, and Della was both relieved and dismayed when she saw Galeon riding in.

Galeon had been paired with Sir Daric, who was wearing a mixture of orange and yellow for his house. They each nodded their readiness, and the attendant at the center waved a flag before sprinting out of the way.

Della knew Galeon thought well of the young man. Would she hold back with him?

Apparently not.

Galeon spurred her stallion into a full gallop, striking Sir Daric in the center of his chest and rolling her shoulder back from the glancing blow of his lance. Della flinched and gripped the arms of her chair as Galeon slowed to a canter, but she appeared uninjured. Only then did Della take her eyes off Galeon to notice that Sir Daric's horse trotted off, its rider on the ground.

Galeon chucked her broken lance and rounded the barricade to return to where Sir Daric lay, and the announcer declared Galeon the winner for unseating her opponent.

Sir Daric staggered to his feet, and Galeon swung off her horse to help him up. She bent her head and nodded at him, clearly speaking as she clapped his shoulder, then kept a steady grip on his elbow and they walked out together to the cheering crowd.

Della's belly heated as she saw a flash of green on Galeon's arm.

The jousting continued as the sun climbed. Each time Galeon came out, Della's heart spiked. And Galeon didn't go unscathed. One lance

barely missed her head. Another two shattered against her shoulder. Della hated each one, but Galeon kept going. She rode and struck her opponents with a purpose and brutality that made Della's toes curl.

Della smiled. Galeon was keeping her promise to her. A foolish promise to make, but she was fulfilling it anyway.

One match was different, however. Della couldn't see Galeon's face, but when a man in sky blue entered opposite her, Galeon's intensity changed.

When they collided, Galeon didn't attempt to avoid his lance, but rather leaned into the impact, using it along with her own thrust to throw him violently backward.

Della rose halfway from her seat as Galeon slowed to a canter, listing forward dangerously before righting herself. That blow must have hurt terribly. Galeon turned her helmeted head up to Della and gave her a small nod, and Della's fear eased. Galeon's opponent hadn't managed to get up from the dirt, and Galeon did not return to help him.

The final round was between Galeon and Sir Alvor. They both broke their lances, Sir Alvor's splintering against Galeon's chest. Della's whole body clenched, but Galeon shook it off. Della was reminded of how Galeon had pushed away the pain after the stampede and walked all day.

Despite herself, Della was impressed. She clapped along with everyone else when Galeon dodged Sir Alvor's final lance and broke her own.

The announcer excitedly cried out, "Sir Galeon wins the joust! But can the Princess's Favorite hold on to her victory in the test of strength?"

Della glanced at Prince Valin, who scowled at the phrasing, but didn't say anything.

By the time the platters of midday food were brought and placed beside Della, Prince Valin's mood had only worsened. He watched the proceedings in stony silence, sitting sullenly on his throne. He reminded Della of a sulking child.

The remaining knights returned to the arena for the second event, this time on foot. They took position behind a line of heavy marble spheres that Della had watched dozens of people help place. The announcer

explained the goal: for each knight to get their stone across the finish line. Della glanced along the row of burly knights. Galeon was powerful but not as largely built as some of her opponents. Della suddenly worried about her careless demand. Would Galeon truly hurt herself attempting to win?

As the flag waved and the announcer yelled the start, Galeon threw her shoulder at the sphere in front of her.

The air filled with cheers, the crash of armor against marble, and grunts of effort as the knights started to roll and shove the round boulders across the open field, striping deep furrows in the earth.

One of Galeon's neighbors knocked into her, sending her off-course.

"A bit of friendly competition," the announcer called, drawing attention to Galeon. It hadn't looked friendly to Della. Galeon managed to correct, if a bit further behind.

The cheering grew louder as the front-runners pulled away from the rest. The leader seemed to be a giant of a woman who wore black and gold. Not far behind was Galeon's meddlesome neighbor.

Galeon stumbled as someone else clearly and deliberately tripped her, kicking her feet out.

They were sabotaging her. Didn't anyone else see what was happening?

Della turned to Prince Valin. "Are they allowed to do that?"

"You gave them a reason to," Prince Valin replied, his face twisting in bitter amusement.

Della's skin suddenly felt uncomfortably tight, like her gown. She looked back. Galeon was still in the front half of the pack though had fallen behind as she had to stand and get her stone rolling again. She threw herself at it and picked up speed, but she was already too far behind to have a chance to win.

Della clapped loudly when Galeon finished tenth, a breath behind the man at her side. Despite the others' meddling, Della couldn't deny Galeon's display was still extremely attractive.

Della cringed at the thought of Galeon's pain. Then Della's toes curled again at the thought of how she could soothe Galeon's aches later.

“Sir Regina wins the test of strength!” the announcer cried. “Sir Galeon has fallen behind, but still an honorable effort. Do not fear, Princess. The winner of the tournament will be decided only with the third and final event—a test of metal.”

Already, the arena was being changed over, two separate rings hastily constructed around the last of the knights who were struggling to cross the finish line.

“What’s this I hear?” the announcer said, cupping his ear dramatically. “Is it true? The Princess’s Favorite used to be a blacksmith? Well then, a test of metal should be no challenge for her!”

A mix of cheers, some laughter, and a few jeers echoed. Della narrowed her eyes at the crowd. Who would jeer at that?

But her attention was distracted back to the arena, as, after no time to rest, Galeon entered one of the rings.

The sword in her hand moved fluidly, her steps confident but light as she circled her opponent. She was in the farther ring, and Della sat forward, wishing she could see better.

“Does the fighting impress you?” Prince Valin asked in Della’s ear. She started and glanced over to find him watching her closely.

“It does, rather,” Della admitted.

“I have led my army into battle many times.”

“Yes, you’ve told me.”

Della returned her gaze to the arena, but Galeon was already gone from the ring. Annoyance tugged at her for having missed it.

“They call me the Warrior Prince for a reason.”

“How nice for you.” Della stretched and twisted her neck until it ached in protest, looking for Galeon. Where had she gone?

The prince stood abruptly, beckoning to the man at his side. “Get my armor. And my sword,” he demanded. He pinned Della with an intense look as he left. “I’ll give you something to be impressed by.”

Della watched in uneasy dismay as the prince joined the event.

It caused quite a stir. The crowd cheered and chanted, spurred on as the announcer declared their Warrior Prince would be taking part in the final rounds. For his bride.

Della wanted to spit out the bitter taste in her mouth.

Prince Valin emerged into the arena, wearing his crown and silver armor, similar to what Galeon wore, though Prince Valin's was embellished with gold.

He waved to the crowd, before turning and staring pointedly up at Della, making sure she was watching. The prince entered a ring with a young knight, who immediately knelt and surrendered. He was replaced by another, who did the same.

The prince was scowling. The crowd grew louder and more restless.

In the other ring, Galeon and the massive lady knight Sir Regina were paired against each other. Galeon dodged a viciously heavy swing and won with a quick, harmless strike to Sir Regina's chest.

"Sir Galeon versus His Highness Prince Valin!" cried the announcer as if all his wildest dreams had just come true, and the crowd seemed to agree. Then they grew quiet, waiting anxiously as Della did, to see what would happen as Galeon climbed into the ring. Her shoulders moved with each labored breath, but her feet were sturdy.

Galeon's helmeted face turned up toward Della, making Della's belly flutter. Then Galeon touched the green ribbon around her arm, still looking at her. Although Della could not hear her question, Della understood.

Everyone was watching. Della didn't want to nod. But she did.

Galeon unwound the ribbon, then presented it to Prince Valin with a bow. The prince snatched it, and the crowd grew deafening over the announcer's cry, "The prince wears the princess's favor!"

Della watched in disgust as the prince wrapped the ribbon around the hilt of his sword.

Unlike the other knights, Galeon did not immediately surrender. She took up her stance, and Prince Valin grinned. He swung. Galeon blocked and stepped to the side.

The prince attacked again, and again, and Galeon defended, but she did not attempt to make her own strike. A blow landed on Galeon's shoulder.

One point to the prince.

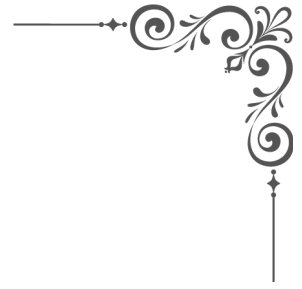
The prince struck out again, and Galeon was slightly more convincing in her attempt to avoid it as it landed on her damaged side. Della flinched.

Galeon stepped back as she pulled off her helmet. Then she dropped to a knee and bowed her head in a sign of surrender.

The crowd went wild with cheers. The prince, however, was no longer grinning. He looked furious as he grabbed Galeon by the front of her breastplate and hauled her upright. Della couldn't hear his words, but he spat them angrily in Galeon's face. Galeon shook her head as she replied calmly.

A hush fell over the crowd again. The prince glared at Galeon for several heart-stopping moments. Then he released her, throwing his head back as he let out a loud laugh that echoed around the silent space.

The tension broke, and everyone cheered again as Prince Valin was declared the winner of the tournament.



CHAPTER 16

A BANQUET OF DESIRE

Galeon sat in a chair near the end of the long banquet table and wondered if she'd ever be able to get out of it again. She was fairly certain she had rebroken at least one rib today. But it had been worth it. Every time she had stolen a glance at Della, the princess had been watching her. Smiling and clapping when Galeon had succeeded.

Galeon had worn her favor and attention with pride until the end. She hadn't wanted to take it off. If the prince had not faced her, perhaps she would have gone to the grave with it still wrapped around her arm. But there was no world in which Galeon could wear Della's favor while facing off against Della's betrothed.

Since when had thinking of the prince as Della's betrothed bothered Galeon so much?

"Good tourney today," Sir Alvor said, nudging Galeon's sore shoulder with his own.

"You did well," Galeon replied.

"Not quite as well as you." Sir Alvor winked. "Especially in the favor arena."

Galeon hoped the flush was hidden in the flickering light.

Sir Alvor leaned in so only Galeon could hear him. "Be careful there."

"I don't know what you mean."

Sir Alvor gave her a look that let her know he didn't buy her nonchalance. "We have become friends, yes?"

"I would like to think so."

"As would I. And so I want to warn you to be careful. I see the way you watch her. The way she watches you."

"I don't know what you mean," Galeon repeated as sweat started to collect on the back of her neck. She glanced over at where Sir Ballany was sitting, satisfyingly bruised and subdued. Had he been talking again?

“Yes, you do,” Sir Alvor countered. “And I’m not telling you what to do or not do. Just be cautious. I don’t want to see your head anywhere besides on your shoulders.”

The food Galeon had just shoved in her mouth turned to ash. She had been ravenous a moment ago but now had no appetite for the feast spread in front of them. She looked up the long table to where Della sat beside Prince Valin.

“We have respect and understanding for each other. But there is nothing beyond that. There has been nothing inappropriate.”

There hadn’t been. Not really. There was the fact that Galeon was hiding Della’s magic. And called her Della. And burned for her with a consuming passion. But they had not truly crossed any lines. Yet.

Sir Alvor shrugged. “It’s not my business if there has. But there will be more attention on you now, after the princess’s actions today.”

Glancing around, Galeon did indeed find many sets of eyes on her.

“You know there are rumors already about you and the prince.”

“And you believe them?” Galeon asked incredulously, hurt burning her throat.

“No, of course I don’t. I’ve known you both far too long. But there are rumors.”

“They are untrue,” Galeon insisted, and Sir Alvor shook his head.

“That doesn’t usually matter. If you have to choose, just be clear with yourself where your loyalty lies—with her, or with him.” Sir Alvor nodded toward the couple at the head of the room.

Galeon had to force the bread in her mouth down with wine.

She had served the prince for ten years. He had pulled her from the darkest moment of her life and given her purpose and hope. She owed everything to him. It should not have been a question. Yet it was.

Galeon’s heart and body screamed for Della, while her head was split.

Galeon set down her wine and reached for water. As tempting as the thought was of softening the aches in her body and in her chest with drink, she couldn’t afford to go there. She was on duty tonight. As she chose to

be. She could have someone else stationed at the princess's stairs tonight of all nights, but Galeon didn't want anyone else there.

She would do her duty regardless of broken ribs and fatigued limbs. For Della.



DELLA FORCED HERSELF to smile as Prince Valin raised his goblet in a toast to her. He still wore her favor. The one Della had given to Galeon.

He took Della's hand and brushed his lips against it. The act which had once left her cold and unaffected now made her skin crawl.

He grinned at her, apparently quite pleased with himself. "Did you enjoy your tournament?" Prince Valin asked, leaning in too close. "Were you sufficiently impressed?"

"Quite." Della tried not to let the sarcasm in her voice through. The prince's grin didn't fade. Instead, his eyes fell to the low neckline of her gown.

"I couldn't allow someone else to claim the right to sit beside you tonight when you look like this."

Della bit back her retort as irritation bubbled in her stomach, along with the wine.

"You will need a new wardrobe," the prince continued, his eyes still glued to Della's chest.

"But I rather like my own," Della said, finding it difficult to keep her tone light.

"As do I. But it isn't suitable."

"It suits me just fine."

"I can't have you dressing like this as my wife."

"Why?"

The prince jerked his head back, his eyes narrowing. "We will be wed."

"Yes, and we've both established neither of us truly wants that. Married or not, I will wear what I choose."

Della should shut her mouth and keep it that way. This was a pointless conversation, since they would never reach the wedding day, let alone beyond it. But this overgrown child of a prince irked her, and Della found she got too much dark satisfaction out of aggravating him.

Anger flashed across the prince's expression. "I hold the crown's line. You will obey me."

"Or what?"

"Don't test me."

"Is that a threat?"

Their affable acquaintance had shifted today, descending into something uglier. He leaned forward again. Della met his stare and didn't retreat.

"You will learn to obey," he breathed in her face.

Della set down her goblet and pushed her chair back. "Congratulations on your victory, Prince Valin. Since the sight of me is so unsuitable, I will leave now. Good night."

A hand clamped around Della's wrist. His grip was strong, but Della wasn't easily breakable.

She looked down into his petulant face, and smiled falsely, leaning in to murmur directly into his ear. "Take your hand off me, or I will scream. Now."

The grip on her loosened enough for Della to convincingly pull away. She didn't look back, instead seeking out Galeon at the other end of the table. A twitch of Galeon's face was the only evidence of her pain as she stood.

Della waited for her near the doors, her heart hammering with anger.

"Are you all right?" Galeon asked.

Della sighed. "I will be fine. Are *you* all right?"

Della hadn't been able to speak with Galeon at all that day since the tournament. Her hand found its way into the crook of Galeon's arm as they walked, and Della couldn't recall placing it there.

"I will be fine," Galeon promised with a shadow of a smile.

When they reached Della's stairs, Della didn't stop. Galeon hesitated briefly, but followed her arm as Della dragged her up. Someone had been in the room recently to light the candles and bank the hearth.

"You must be exhausted," Della commented, watching Galeon closely.

"I admit I am a little tired." Galeon's voice was warm and intimate, caressing Della in the soft, flickering light.

"Tournament champion." Della stepped closer and pretended to brush some dust from Galeon's breastplate.

"The prince is champion."

"Hardly." Della rolled her eyes, but then her stomach clenched at the memory of her unacknowledged fear as he had shouted at Galeon in the arena. "You are lucky he likes you."

"I am."

Della cleared her throat. She didn't want to talk or think about Prince Valin. She wanted the woman standing in front of her.

"You were very impressive out there."

Galeon swallowed. "Thank you."

"This belongs to you." Della reached into her tight bodice and held up a second green ribbon she had tucked there earlier.

Galeon stood perfectly still as Della looped it around her arm.

When Della looked back into Galeon's eyes, she saw fire. It matched the heat simmering through Della.

Della leaned in.

At the last moment, Galeon turned her head, so Della's lips brushed Galeon's cheek in the shadow of a thwarted kiss. Still, the feeling of her skin and the scent of her, clean and metallic, made Della hum.

"We shouldn't," Galeon said, her voice rough.

Bitter disappointment and a flash of hurt joined Della's desire. She didn't ask why not. She knew very well why they shouldn't.

"What if I were not the princess?" Della whispered. "What if I were free? Tell me, Sir Galeon. If things were different, would you accept my

kiss?”

“If things were different.”

The simple admission broke Della’s self-control. “Then let’s change them.”

Della cupped Galeon’s jaw and kissed her.

For a terrible moment, Galeon didn’t respond. Then she did.

Oh, she did.

Her lips parted against Della’s, meeting and answering her. Della crashed against Galeon’s unyielding chest, the armor so cold and Galeon so wonderfully warm. Della prickled with awareness everywhere they made contact. When she moaned into Galeon’s mouth, the needy sound she earned back stoked the flames to a roar.

Della gripped Galeon’s neck and dug her fingers beneath her knotted hair as Galeon’s sizzling hands slid frantically along the silk of Della’s sides and back, drawing their hips gloriously together.

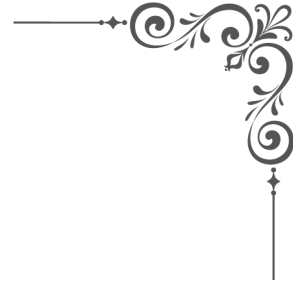
Della swayed, unsteady as she was abruptly left standing alone, Galeon retreating in long backward strides.

“Please forgive me,” Galeon breathed.

Della was unsure if Galeon was apologizing for the kiss, or for pulling away. Or if she was even speaking to Della at all.

Then Galeon was gone, the sound of her heavy boots descending the stone steps fading.

Della stared after her, heart in her throat and body on fire.



CHAPTER 17

IN THE AFTERMATH

Galeon watched the purple sky languidly brighten beyond the window. Her legs had long since gone numb from the discomfort of her position as she sat on the steps. The green ribbon ran like water through her fingers over and over. As it had all night.

After tumbling methodically through every emotion, Galeon's mind and body had settled on numb calm in the pre-dawn. Like her legs.

She'd half convinced herself she had imagined it. It was impossible to think Della had kissed her. Or that Galeon had kissed her back. Yet the imprint of lips on Galeon's mouth lingered. Galeon's heart stuttered at the thought.

She wanted to do it again.

They had crossed a line. They had certainly changed things. But none of the things that would make it possible for Galeon to have what she wanted.

The palace slowly woke and the sun peeked over the mountains.

"What are you doing here?" asked Viv, resting a tray of food near Galeon's hip. "You look like you haven't slept."

"I haven't," Galeon confirmed. She had stolen a too-brief nap before the banquet the previous evening, but that had been her only true rest.

"Well, you should."

"Probably."

Viv eyed the ribbon Galeon was still fiddling with, and Galeon quickly tucked it out of sight.

"It seems I have some competition," Viv said sourly.

"It's not like that."

"Of course, her favor is much more meaningful than mine."

"It's not like that," Galeon repeated. Except it was. "How is Sid?"

"The physician thinks he's out of the worst danger."

"I'm glad," Galeon said earnestly.

Viv watched Galeon for a moment. “You should go for it.”

“What?”

“Her.” Viv gestured at the stairs. “The princess.”

“I—but—I don’t...”

Viv chuckled, a little sadly. “It’s all right, Sir Galeon.” Then she turned. “I will tell Sir Daric to come replace you.”

“Thank you,” Galeon called after her.

Galeon fell on her food, and when Sir Daric arrived, she reluctantly relinquished her post to him. She hurried through the halls and entered the prince’s wing only to see the man himself walking toward her.

Galeon halted, the sight of Prince Valin bringing back the guilt she’d been trying to stomach all night. It churned in her gut as he smiled at her in greeting.

“Gal! Good tournament yesterday.”

Galeon bowed. “And yourself, Your Highness.”

“I think I was a bit harsh with you in the ring.” The prince studied a jewel on his finger.

“I do not mind, Your Highness,” Galeon replied through the acid burning her throat.

“Will you bring the princess to meet me later? I have a riding appointment with Lord Clayton, but perhaps a late lunch?”

“Of course.”

“She may not want to come,” the prince warned as Galeon tried to sidestep him.

“Why is that, Your Highness?”

“Yesterday was not my finest day. But I need to see her.”

“I will do my best.”

“Good.” The prince relaxed with a grin, as if all his worries had been settled. “I know you’ll be able to persuade her.”

Galeon tried not to run as she fled along the hall to her own room.

Her hands shook as she unbuckled her armor. Then she changed out of her damp shirt and climbed under her blanket. She would just rest for a moment...

Hazy images of creamy skin drifted through Galeon's sleep. Warm softness and heat pressed against her, pinning her. Trapping her. Unbound dark hair dragged over her chest and face, covering her eyes. Then it bound around Galeon's throat, constricting her until she couldn't draw breath. And Galeon let it. She welcomed it.

Galeon blinked open her eyes, alone and cold in her bed despite the sun burning high and bright beyond the window.

She dragged herself upright, groaning as her strained ribs and muscles protested. She ignored their desires and stumbled into her clothes, trying to hurry.

As she bent to retrieve her boots, her eyes fell to her bedside table. Lillian's things rested alongside the books Della had brought during Galeon's recovery.

Galeon's insides were a jumbled mess, and she stubbornly threw the confusion into a corner of her mind to be sorted out later. She didn't have time to look at it now.

Her feet echoed too loudly as she jogged back to the princess's tower. As her feet climbed Della's steps, Galeon's heart climbed into her throat in anticipation of seeing her again.

How would Della act? How would Galeon act? Would they pretend it hadn't happened?

The door was open. Galeon raised her hand to knock on the archway, but Della must have heard her noisy arrival and was standing only a pace away. Within easy reach.

Galeon longed to snatch an arm around her waist and haul her close again. She clenched her fists and let them drop to her sides as she kept her gaze over Della's shoulder.

"Hi," Della said. She sounded slightly breathless.

"Good morning." Galeon chanced a glance at Della's face and saw an enchanting smile curve her mouth.

“It’s afternoon, actually.”

“Right. Well.”

Della stepped closer. “I went down to look for you earlier.”

Galeon hated she had not been there for her. “I was—”

“Sleeping. Yes, I know. And I am glad. You need rest, Galeon.”

Della was almost touching Galeon now. Galeon should step away. She should stop her. Instead, she held still as Della placed a palm on Galeon’s cheek, tilting Galeon’s face.

As Della’s lips brushed hers, Galeon’s resistance dissolved.

“I need to speak with you,” Galeon murmured as Della pulled her in for another kiss, a bit deeper, and threatening to drown Galeon.

“Later,” Della replied, dancing her lips along Galeon’s jaw and sending a shudder of pleasure all the way through the soles of Galeon’s feet.

“It’s the prince,” Galeon managed.

Della stiffened. “What about him?”

“He wants to see you.”

“Does he.” Ice laced Della’s voice.

“Something about yesterday being a bad day.”

Della sighed and moved away. Galeon was both disappointed and relieved.

“When?”

“A late lunch.”

“I just ate.” Della’s face was cold, but then she sighed again. “Oh very well.”

“What happened yesterday?” Galeon asked, not entirely sure she wanted to know.

“He was an ass.”

Galeon swallowed. “I am sure he had a reason.”

“Are you implying it was my fault?”

“No, not at all. But I doubt he meant it.”

“I don’t understand how you put up with him, and even seem to like him,” Della said as she brushed past Galeon down the stairs.

Galeon frowned as she followed. “He is my liege.”

“I understand that. But you endure so much and still you defend his childish behavior.”

“Don’t talk about him like that,” Galeon replied, her ire and bile rising in defense of him.

“See what I mean?”

“When you get to know him better, you will understand.”

“I don’t want to know him better,” Della muttered as they left the stairs and entered the hall. “And he doesn’t want to know me either.”

“That’s not true. Please don’t think that.”

“Seriously?” Della whirled on Galeon, her eyes sparking.

Galeon stepped back, confused. “Why are you angry with me?”

“A dog who begs at the hand of the one who beats it will never be free.”

Galeon blinked. “Did you just call me a dog?” Galeon loved dogs. But the words and implication behind them hurt.

Della huffed and rolled her eyes, but didn’t reply, just turned and kept walking. Galeon flanked her. She needed to talk to Della, to fix what had gone wrong, but other people mingled and passed in the halls.

“I’m sorry,” Galeon said quietly, not sure what she was apologizing for.



DELLA WAS ANGRY. AT herself, mostly. All she wanted to do was drag Galeon close and kiss her until they both forgot Prince Valin existed. But she couldn’t do that. She had to see the man instead. And Galeon would rather bring Della to him. Logically, it made sense, but Della wasn’t thinking with her head, and she hated it.

They paused outside the prince’s door. Della took a deep breath and relaxed her face, preparing the fake smile. She had agreed to make an

appearance of effort. She could not forget that, no matter what the prince did.

The prince answered the door. He smiled first at Galeon, no sign of his fury of yesterday, and then turned to Della.

Sometimes the prince seemed to care for Galeon deeply, and sometimes he seemed incapable of it. Della didn't understand their relationship. But that was not Galeon's fault. Guilt slithered through Della when she recalled her most recent words. Had she really implied she thought Galeon was a dog?

A bouquet of exotic flowers appeared in Della's face, and she accepted them, bringing them up to her nose.

"How lovely. Thank you," she said blandly.

Galeon followed Della inside and closed the door, but kept her eyes averted. Sir Alvor was also there as another ever-present chaperone. Della was glad to have them.

"Would you like something to eat? Drink?" The prince gestured to a table already laid out for them.

"Yes, please," Della lied, trying to sound sweet. Sweetness was not a quality that came naturally.

"You look very beautiful today," Prince Valin said.

Della nearly laughed. She couldn't quite control her eyebrows, however.

"I did not intend to speak so bluntly or crudely yesterday. You are of course free to keep your own wardrobe. I hope you understand that my comments came from a place of tradition and expectation."

Della had thought the comments came from places such as jealousy, pride, and conceit. But she had to make nice. "We are in a difficult situation," she said, rather proud of the diplomacy of her reply.

The prince looked down at a ring he was twirling back and forth. "As you probably know, my mother has a...reputation. She was rarely seen with my father. He was reported to be gone for the full two years before my birth. I don't want the parentage of our children questioned."

“I see.” Della considered him. It didn’t excuse his behavior, but it did help to explain why he had gotten so controlling and possessive. “Then let’s start again.”

The prince visibly relaxed and he smiled more easily. “Good.”

Then he poured some wine.

As far as apologies went, it was appallingly poor. But Della wasn’t here to quibble over it. It didn’t matter. She wouldn’t matter for much longer.

She pretended to listen as he told her about his ride with Lord Clayton. She sipped her wine, eager to return to the quiet solitude of her room, and the privacy to speak with Galeon. Or to kiss her. Both options were appealing.

Della needed to apologize to Galeon. Properly. But the prince yammered on, and then asked if she would join him for a belated tour of the gardens.

Prince Valin offered his arm, and she forced another smile. She didn’t want to touch him. She didn’t even want to be near him.

At least the gardens were pleasant. Not as pleasant as when Della had walked them or sat in the shade reading with Galeon. Della glanced over her shoulder. Galeon met her gaze and that settled Della in ways she hadn’t realized she needed.

She refocused on what the prince was saying, stopping near the rear of the garden, where a narrow slit was carved in the lower wall.

Della pulled free of Prince Valin’s arm and walked over to the window.

Across the river, the fields lay trampled where the arena and tents had been established, currently being dismantled and leaving a scab on the land.

Someone stepped up behind her. Her immediate thought was of Galeon, but it wasn’t. Prince Valin invaded her space and she shifted forward to get away.

“Lovely, isn’t it?” Prince Valin said too close to her ear.

“It is,” Della agreed, turning. Something in the shiver over her skin told her not to have her back to him.

“Just like you.” His voice pitched low and was probably meant to be seductive. The shiver turned to an itch on Della’s skin. “I am sorry we have not connected well since your arrival. I have been so busy. But I intend to make more effort.”

To Della’s horror, he leaned in, and Della’s instincts took charge. She recoiled, leaping away. She walked two steps and forced herself to stop, her heart accelerating as she waited for his reaction.

She shouldn’t rebuff him. But she wasn’t about to let him kiss her.

He watched her with a chillingly intense look on his face.

His anger, Della could deal with. His lust, she would not.

“I am not ready for that sort of connection, Your Highness,” Della said frigidly.

Voices saved Della from his reply, as a handful of nobles entered their section of the garden. Della greeted them too enthusiastically, pretending to remember who in the world they were. She must have met them, but she didn’t recall their names.

Then she recognized Lady Clayton. Like a dying woman, Della seized onto her.



IT TOOK ALL OF GALEON’S willpower to keep her face blank. She did not take her eyes off Della as she became purposefully engrossed in a conversation about silk with Lady Clayton.

He’d tried to kiss her. And Galeon wanted to punch him. And she couldn’t want that.

It wasn’t rational, and yet it was the only thing that made sense.

Della was going to marry the prince. They’d be doing far more than kiss. Galeon thought she might be ill.

Della was Galeon’s to kiss. Except she wasn’t. Galeon only wanted her to be.

Prince Valin forced a smile, the small party enfolding the royals and slowly making their way back toward the palace. The sun was already sinking.

They'd be dining in the banquet hall again tonight, where Galeon would be standing by the wall instead of sitting at the table. Her role in the festivities had reverted to its usual place. Galeon had never minded before.

Watching Della with the other nobles that evening filled Galeon with something dark and ugly. It simmered when Della laughed with the stunning Lady Clayton. The lady placed a delicate hand on Della's bare shoulder, leaning in and murmuring in Della's ear. Della smiled and didn't pull away.

Galeon felt every bit the poor, dirty blacksmith she'd once been as the faded heat of the day clung to her skin in salty dampness beneath her shirt.

She needed a bath.

As quietly as she could, she slipped from the hall. She shouldn't have worried. No one noticed.

She knocked on Sir Daric's door.

"Sir," the young man said, greeting her with a pleased smile and respectful bow. He was a good kid. Since when had she thought of a twenty-three-year-old man as a kid?

"I need you to watch the princess tonight."

"Of course," Daric agreed eagerly as the faintest hint of a blush crept up his face.

Galeon narrowed her eyes. "Why are you looking like that?"

"Like what, sir?"

Galeon forced down her reactive jealousy. "Nothing. Thank you."

She left before she said anything else out of line. Galeon needed to get ahold of herself. She also needed to be stronger if she wanted to survive her future here.

The sudden, unbidden image of Della in Prince Valin's bed—of him in hers—had Galeon grinding her teeth. But she knew it would happen. And she would have to get over it.

Her armor fell loudly on her floor as she stripped it off.

Things had changed, that was for certain. Before, Galeon had yearned for Della but knew it would never grow into anything. Now that it had—now that Galeon had tasted her—she craved more. Demanded it. Yet she couldn't.

Galeon roughly yanked out the tie holding her hair back and tore off her clothes.

She noticed the imperfections in her skin in new ways as she cleaned up. Scars from the horrors of her life branded her. Lines and blots underlined where smoothness had once been. Her breasts were uneven and rested differently than they used to. Would Della mind? Would Della ever know? Did Della want to know?

"Fuck," Galeon muttered, pressing the heels of her palms into her eyes as she sank down onto her bed. She was being irrational as well as pathetic.

She snuffed her candles and crawled between the cool sheets. Then she lay there in the dark, staring at the ceiling.

Her hand found the locket at her throat as it did most nights.

"What in the world am I doing, Lillian?" Galeon whispered. "I wish you could tell me. You were always better at these things."

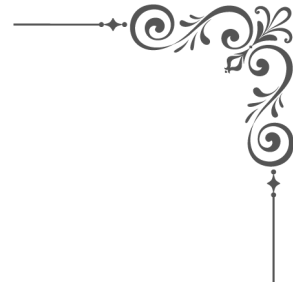
Galeon had been a fumbling mess at seventeen, stumbling over her words. Lillian had laughed, but not at her, and then kissed her silent.

Lillian had been the one to say she loved Galeon first. Lillian had been the one to suggest they marry. If Galeon could have gone back, she would have done things differently. Galeon would not have waited two years before making Lillian her wife. She would have expressed her love more. Shared her heart more.

She had been so arrogant to think they had time.

“I want her,” Galeon told the memory of her wife. “You’re not angry about that, are you?” The fear and guilt of that surfaced, clogging Galeon’s throat. “I know you said that if anything happened to either of us, we should try to be happy. To move on. I didn’t listen.” Galeon smiled at that. “Della doesn’t listen well either. Does that make us a good pair, or the worst, do you think?”

For the millionth time, Galeon wished Lillian could answer.



CHAPTER 18

A SHOW

Everyone laughed as the actor did something on stage. Della wasn't paying attention. Instead of watching the play taking place in one corner of the ballroom, her eyes were on Galeon.

Della had been disappointed when Sir Daric had escorted her back to her room after dinner last night, and even more when he had again been the one to shepherd her around today. But now Galeon entered and relieved the man. Della tried to catch her eye. Galeon glanced at Della briefly to acknowledge her presence, and then looked away.

That hurt. It shouldn't, but it did. Della knew they had to be discreet in such a crowded room. Still, Della hadn't spoken with Galeon since the previous afternoon. When Della had snapped at her unfairly, just as she'd accused the prince of doing.

Della was determined to make it up to her. Exactly how Della would make it up to her depended on Galeon.

The prince's eyes were on Della again. He'd been oscillating between watching the play and watching her. Della forced herself to look at him and smile, but it felt brittle on her face.

"Are you enjoying the show?" Prince Valin asked her.

"Very much," Della lied.

"I think you will enjoy this next part."

Why did that seem ominous? Della tried to shake the feeling as an actor dressed as the prince walked out to applause.

The actor on stage defeated droves of enemies as the backdrop shifted to a battlefield. Della barely managed not to roll her eyes. She understood the prince was proud of his Warrior Prince title, but she wasn't impressed.

"Remarkable. I have no words," Della said, clapping with everyone else and aiming for sweet again. It seemed to work and he smiled more genuinely.

Then, what was happening on stage finally captured her attention.

A woman in chains was being led out to polite boos from the gathering of high-born nobles. Her face was painted pale, with green ringing her eyes.

“Death to the witch!” the fake prince said, pointing his sword at the woman.

The audience clapped as a knight dressed in silver armor delivered a killing blow that was dramatically fake but still made Della flinch.

It was only a play.

The applause irritated her skin. The metal tiara on her forehead seemed to burn too cold.

She sought out Galeon, who met her gaze with understanding. Galeon pushed off the wall and was already heading toward her as Della stood.

“I’m feeling a bit unwell. Too much wine, I think,” Della said.

The prince frowned. “But the play is not over.”

“And it will go on without me.” Della tried to ease her departure with another smile. She wasn’t sure it worked as well, but she didn’t care just then. She needed to get away.

Galeon was there, and Della reached for her, taking her arm as they walked out, the sounds of the ballroom fading.

“Are you all right?” Galeon asked. Her voice washed over Della, soothing her.

“Better now. I haven’t seen you since yesterday.” Della tried not to sound accusatory.

“Yes, well. I needed some rest.”

Della didn’t believe that was the whole reason. “I need to apologize.”

“For what?” Galeon looked genuinely baffled, and it made Della smile again.

“For the way I spoke to you yesterday. What I said was unfair.”

“You did nothing wrong.”

“Well, I disagree. And I won’t listen to you if you try to convince me otherwise. But I am sorry.”

Galeon's mouth curved as they started up the tower steps. "Then I won't listen to your apology. But it is noted."

They entered Della's dimly lit room.

"Will you read to me?" Della asked.

"We've finished your book."

"Read it again."

Della led Galeon to the sofa. When she placed her hands on Galeon's shoulders and pushed, Galeon complied. Della wanted to crawl into her lap. Instead, Della sat on the other end of the sofa and grabbed the book. She held it out, but Galeon did not take it.

"What if I want you to read to me this time?" Galeon asked.

Della froze. "I...no."

Galeon's warm, teasing expression vanished, and she took the book. "As you wish."

Della's gut twisted. "I can't read," she blurted, shame burning her cheeks.

Galeon looked at her for too long.

"I never learned," Della added unnecessarily.

"How did that get missed in your education?"

"It just was." Della folded her arms protectively over her chest, but then realized it and forced herself to straighten and her arms to fall.

"I couldn't read when I came here either," Galeon said, her voice calm and measured.

"Really?" Della was surprised.

"A struggling blacksmith didn't think it the most important skill when we needed to eat. And books are expensive. Surely you noticed how poorly I do even with a story I know."

"You don't do poorly at all."

Galeon raised an eyebrow in disbelief, but she shrugged.

"Does it bother you?" Della asked.

“Does what bother me?”

“I lied.”

Galeon smiled. “I already knew you were a liar, Della.”

Heat curled in Della’s fluttering belly. “I’m lying about other things too,” she warned.

“Like what?”

“Like things I cannot tell you about. Hence the lying.”

Galeon was still smiling her deliciously lopsided smile. Della moved closer. She shouldn’t be saying these things, but something in her needed to prove that Galeon would leave her.

“You aren’t scared of me?” Della asked.

“Oh, I’m terrified of you.” The raw honesty in the desire in Galeon’s voice and eyes drew Della in.

Della kissed her, sliding her fingers over Galeon’s jaw, along her raised scar, around behind her ear. And Galeon kissed her back, but only briefly.

“We shouldn’t,” Galeon said.

Della hated those words. “We should,” she challenged and kissed Galeon harder.

“You are engaged,” Galeon murmured against her lips. “The prince...”

Della stood abruptly, pacing to the fire and back. “I know that, Galeon.”

Galeon sat forward, bracing her elbows on her knees. “I’m sorry.”

Della huffed out her frustration. “If I could, I would leave him. I would have already left. But I can’t. I don’t have that luxury. And I’m already lying to him. So, what am I to do—be miserable? For what? It may not be the right thing, but it feels right.”

Galeon’s expression pinched with something like pain or regret.

“I never claimed to be good,” Della whispered. “I’m just a woman trying to deal with what life has given me. I haven’t truly wanted many things before, and there are a thousand reasons I shouldn’t want this. But I do anyway. I want you, Galeon.”

“What do you want me for?” Galeon asked hesitantly. “A moment? A night? A lifetime of being your dirty secret?”

Della’s heart threatened to collapse under the tension in her ribcage. She couldn’t have Galeon for a lifetime. But she thought, if things were different, she might have wanted to. “Whatever you are willing to give me.”

Galeon blew out her breath as she stood too, pacing the other way and then back.

“I already live in secrets,” Della admitted.

“I don’t.”

And Della knew what Galeon’s answer was. Della nodded as her chest fractured. How could it hurt so much? “I understand.”



GALEON RAN AN AGITATED hand over her face. She was torn between the half of her that wanted to run, and the half of her that wanted to murder that first half and then ravish the beautiful, ruthless woman in front of her.

It wasn’t fair. None of this was. Life was cruel in the worst ways, but they still had to deal with it, as Della said.

Della was watching her with sadness in her eyes and Galeon couldn’t bear it.

“I want to give you everything,” Galeon said, feeling like she was wandering blindly toward a cliff, unsure where the edge was. “I want your nights and your days all to myself. I want your secrets, every last one. I want to fall on my knees for you right now. I want to throw you in that bed. I want to—”

“What?” Della breathed, but Galeon shook her head.

“I want you, but...I’m still figuring out what to do about it.”

The sadness in Della’s eyes slowly turned to something else.

“Well then,” Della whispered, and a shiver ran down Galeon’s whole body. A wicked smile curved Della’s mouth. “While you think about it.” Della’s hands drifted behind her. “If you will not touch me, I will.”

Galeon had no air. Breathing was a forgotten memory as Della undid the few laces keeping her securely covered by silk.

A few tugs, and the fine layers of fabric slithered down to the floor.

Della stood bared, and Galeon looked. Every fraction of skin called to a longing deep inside her. Galeon yearned to follow each dip and crease and swell. Her chest ached to pull Della close.

Reaching into her hair, Della plucked out the few pins there, letting them fall with tinkling clarity to the marble at her feet. Then she sauntered back to the sofa. The sway of her hips and the sweep of her long hair turned Galeon's mouth dry.

Della sank down onto the pink patterned fabric, reclining comfortably. The princess. The witch. The temptress.

Della met Galeon's gaze, and she grinned as her lucky hands moved lazily across her skin. "Feel free to leave anytime," she said cruelly. Then she bit her lip and one hand snaked its way between her spreading legs.

Galeon should leave. She should turn away. Instead, she watched. And she listened. And she wanted.

Galeon's breathing quickened, matching Della's. She was somehow painfully aware of her own body while feeling separated from it.

She was standing closer than she had been. She didn't remember moving.

Della panted and stared up at her as she touched herself as she had promised. Or threatened—Galeon wasn't sure which it was. Perhaps both.

Galeon knew Della would welcome her. Wanted her too. It would be so easy to give in. Della was right there. Didn't Galeon deserve something easy for once?

A thread of restraint kept her standing an unsafe pace away. No, not restraint—fear. Fear that Galeon's carefully constructed life was crumbling. And fear that she didn't care.

Galeon's cracks were widening, and she wasn't sure she would be able to put herself back together again if Della broke her.

Galeon tried to close her eyes, but her name on Della's lips, whispered in a breathless moan, had them flying open again.

Della was magnificent as she arched and shuddered, the muscles in her thighs and feet tensing and curling. She dropped her head back and a smile curved her lips. She was everything Galeon desired.

And Galeon ran.

She stuttered to a halt halfway down the flight of stairs. She couldn't face the hallway below. The light, the space. She wanted—

She needed—

In the dark quiet of the stairwell, she leaned against the wall and reached for her waistband.

It didn't take much. She was already there. Galeon gasped as her pleasure barreled through her like a stampede of griffins. The world blurred and spun, and Galeon relied on the support of the smooth marble tower, wishing it was warm and soft. Wishing things were different.

When she came back to herself, she wasn't alone.

Della stood a few steps above her, outlined in the faint moonlight filtering through the narrow window. She'd thrown on a robe and it gaped open, revealing as much as it hid in the cool night air.

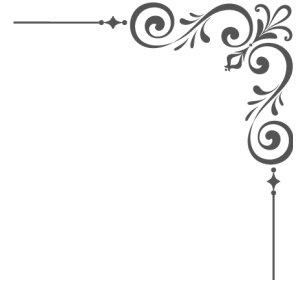
Galeon straightened, flexing her hand. The sticky evidence of her desire glazed her fingers. She could smell it.

"You saw?" Galeon croaked.

"Yes. And I'm not sorry."

Galeon's breaths were loud, echoing around them. She looked up at Della and spoke her heart. "Neither am I."

Then she turned on legs she forced to be steady and climbed down the rest of the steps.



CHAPTER 19

A SECOND SURPRISE IN THE LIBRARY

Excitement filled Della's limbs as she lay awake in her bed, the morning creeping into her room. She should have been sleeping, but the memory of her encounter with Galeon the night before had her heart racing.

Galeon made her wild and yet safe in ways Della never had been. Galeon had seen the worst parts of her, the ugliest secret. And she hadn't run away. Well, she *had* eventually run away, but that was because Della had pushed her. Della had known she was pushing as she was doing it. But the scorching sensation of Galeon's gaze on her had thrilled Della too much.

She was smiling when Annet arrived.

Her sister narrowed her eyes. "What did you do?"

Della bit her lips. "Something quite scandalous."

"Should I be worried?"

"I don't think so."

"Did it have anything to do with your lady knight?"

"How did you know?"

Annet rolled her eyes and threw open Della's wardrobe. "Tonight there's the music evening, don't forget. Do you care what you wear?"

"I thought that's what maids were for."

"I don't think I like being your maid. But being a princess suits you. You have the imperious, bossy authority to pull it off."

Della laughed, in too much of a good mood to let Annet's comments annoy her.

Della was still smiling as she sat in front of the vanity and Annet twisted the top portion of her hair up. But her cheer was tempered by Annet's drawn expression.

"What's wrong?" Della asked.

Annet took a moment before she met Della's gaze in the mirror. "You really are happy, aren't you?"

Della nodded.

"You can't keep her, Della," Annet whispered gently.

Della's happiness wilted. "I know that."

Della knew her time with Galeon was short. She would be dying soon—then they would be gone. There wouldn't be time to explain, and it would be too risky, anyway. It was just one of the many reasons Della shouldn't want Galeon.

Love and lifetimes were not part of Della's reality. But the next week was.

"Why her?" Annet asked, tucking the last pin into Della's hair.

"I can be real with her."

"You are lying to her about basically everything."

"True. But I've told her I'm a liar and she seems to like me anyway."

"You told her..." Annet shook her head and raised her eyes to the ceiling as if seeking patience.

"I didn't tell her what the lies were," Della defended herself.

"Oh, Della."

"What?"

"Don't pretend to be innocent. It doesn't work on you."

Della's smile returned. "You are right."

"Just don't get caught up in it."

And there Della's smile went again. She grabbed Annet's hand. "I've promised before and I'll promise again. Nothing is going to change our plan."

"Good." Annet squeezed her hand and then withdrew it. "There, all done. Wear the blue gown today and the purple one tonight."

"See, you make a good maid after all."

Della ducked as Annet chucked the hairbrush at her.



GALEON HAD NOT BEEN staring at the steps, anxiously listening for the sound of quiet footsteps all morning. She had not been holding her breath when she finally heard them.

As Galeon slid her eyes over Della's blue-clad form, she thrummed with pleasure at knowing what lay beneath that silk. Her heart climbed into her throat as Della smiled. It was a secret smile. A secret they shared.

Galeon stood there like the lovesick fool she was, just drinking in the sight of Della. Della didn't seem to mind, because she looked right back.

"Let's go to the library today," Della finally said. "Choose a new book to read."

Galeon would go anywhere with this woman. "As you wish."

She wanted to pull Della in for a good-morning kiss. She settled for Della's hand on her arm as they made their way down the hall.

"You aren't sorry yet?" Della asked quietly, looking at Galeon sideways.

Galeon's heart hammered louder. "I should be."

A pleased smirk crawled over Della's face, and Galeon loved it.

The heat of the night had burned away the guilt that should have been in its stead. The guilt was still there, creeping at the edges of Galeon's mind, but she ignored it, focusing on the much more pleasant happiness warming her chest as Della smiled.

The hall to the library was quiet. The hustle and bustle of the palace rumbled on around them, but they existed in a slice of calm as the breeze shimmered the frilly leaves of the trees reaching from the courtyard below.

Della paused, and then turned to whisper in Galeon's ear, pressing her body into Galeon's arm. "If I pulled you into that alcove and kissed you, would you let me?"

Desire flooded Galeon. Her mouth replied before her mind could decide if it was wise. "Yes."

Della drew Galeon into the small indent in the wall. It was a wildly reckless thing to do, but Galeon did it anyway.

Della kissed her and Galeon held Della's face. Felt the silk of her neck and the silk of her gown hiding the wonderfully warm and imperfect skin beneath. Galeon's boundaries were rubble around her feet.

Della gripped Galeon's hip and the back of her neck with almost bruising intensity. Delirious from want and Della's touch, Galeon pressed up against Della's welcoming body, threading their legs together.

Then her sense kicked back in, and she pulled away.

Della's flushed face fell.

"Not here," Galeon murmured, peering out into the still-deserted hallway.

Her heart hammered from the kiss and the real possibility of being caught. Galeon was never so careless. But apparently, she lost her ability to think reasonably around Della.

Thoroughly aroused, Galeon tried to calm herself as she offered her arm to Della again. Della let out a husky, wonderful laugh and Galeon wanted to hear it again.

"Was that a promise for somewhere else, then?" Della asked.

"Perhaps."

The long hall beckoned them and they hurried down it. The door to the library lay just ahead, standing slightly ajar.

In her haste to get Della alone, Galeon did not hear the sounds until it was too late.



THEY MADE IT A FEW steps into the room. Della blinked as she processed what she was seeing.

Della and Galeon were not the only ones looking for a tryst in the library, it seemed.

The long, shapely legs of a woman were wrapped tightly around a man's waist. The falls of her skirts were made of rich magenta silk. Della had complimented that color on her last week.

The man between those legs, however, was not the lady's husband.

Galeon turned abruptly, wrapping an arm around Della's waist to guide her away. But they must have made some sort of sound.

The coupling couple broke apart. Della looked between the wide-eyed flushed faces of Lady Clayton and Prince Valin.

"Oh," Lady Clayton breathed, covering her mouth with one hand and her impressive and bare chest with the other.

Several emotions flitted through Della. The first was anger. The second was amusement. The third was relief. None of them made much sense to her, but she didn't dwell on any for long.

She turned, following the pressure of Galeon's arm to retreat.

"Wait," Prince Valin called.

"Sorry to interrupt," Della said, her voice coming out calm. "Carry on."

Carry on? That was definitely not the correct response.

"No, wait, I can...This isn't..."

Della was out in the hall now and she heard the prince following.

"Gal, wait. Princess, I can explain."

"The princess wishes to return to her room, Your Highness," Galeon said, her voice ominously flat as she propelled Della along the hallway.

"I can explain," the prince insisted.

"I don't believe there is much to explain," Della threw over her shoulder.

Prince Valin muttered a curse and a second pair of feet sounded in the hall.

"Your Highness," Lady Clayton called hesitantly, her lilting voice as lovely as ever.

"Get away from me," the prince retorted.

That made Della angry. She wasn't truly surprised by what she had just witnessed. She had seen the way Lady Clayton had looked admiringly at

the prince. But he was the one with the power. He was the prince, and she was a lady.

Like Della was the princess and Galeon was her knight.

Della cringed and shoved that thought away. It wasn't the same. It wasn't—was it?

They rounded the corner into Della's hall. Still, the prince pursued.

"Just wait. I order you to wait!"

Galeon's feet faltered. The last thing Della wanted to do was listen, but she understood the need for Galeon to.

Della forced herself to pause and turn. She met his gaze and raised her chin.

He was still flushed, whether from his exertion with Lady Clayton or from running after them, Della was not sure. His hair was a mess, and his shirt was half-tucked.

"I'm waiting," Della said calmly.

"It didn't mean anything."

"Very well."

"She seduced me."

"Fine."

The prince scowled. "You've refused my attention."

"I have."

He stepped closer. "Why don't you like me?"

"I never said that."

The prince let out a bitter laugh. "But you've made it abundantly clear. You aren't even upset, are you?"

Della raised her eyebrows. "Would you prefer me hysterical? I thought you wanted an obedient wife."

The prince's face pinched with anger. "I've been trying!" The yell reverberated off the marble around them. "But nothing I do will be good enough, will it?"

Sir Alvor rounded the corner, but then turned discreetly away, watching the rest of the hall.

Della didn't reply.

Prince Valin was correct that she wasn't angry about Lady Clayton. The lady was welcome to him, and he to her. Della couldn't point any fingers there. But his anger toward them both for being caught pissed Della off.

Della turned away, refusing to look at him anymore.

"I'll show you what you're missing," he growled.

Then he was touching her, grabbing her face and forcing it up as he pressed his mouth to hers.

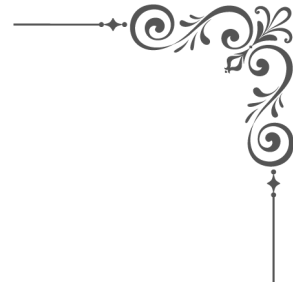
Della didn't think. She simply reacted.

She wrenched out of his grip and slapped him across the face. He stumbled from the force of her blow.

Fury coursed through Della, then a cold douse of realization.

She should not have done that.

The prince clutched at his jaw. But the retaliation his eyes promised never reached her.



CHAPTER 20

A TRUTH AND A LIE

As Galeon stepped between the prince and Della, there was no question or doubt in her mind. She chose Della.

She expected the punch, and part of her welcomed it. Blood warmed her mouth as she stared back at her prince, prepared to take another. Whatever he might throw at Galeon, he would not get near Della.

Danger flashed in Prince Valin's expression as Galeon defied him. Galeon acknowledged a shiver of fear, but it wouldn't move her.

"The princess would like to return to her room. Your Highness." Galeon's voice sounded odd.

Sir Alvor appeared at the prince's side. "You have an appointment this afternoon, Your Highness," Sir Alvor prompted, his own tone carefully calm and casual.

The prince glared with alarming rage at Galeon. She braced herself for another blow, but it didn't come. Instead, the prince spun on his heel.

Galeon watched until Prince Valin was safely out of sight, Sir Alvor flanking him.

Then she refocused on Della. Galeon instinctively reached for her, but Della was already out of reach, hurrying up the steps. Della didn't stop at the top, but moved to her balcony and into the overly bright, cheerful sunlight.

She stood with her back to Galeon, her shoulders quivering. Galeon moved to the wardrobe and withdrew a warm, silk-lined cloak, but Della shrugged away from it.

"I'm not cold," she murmured. "And I thought I told you to stay out of my wardrobe."

Galeon could not read Della. "He will not lay a hand on you," Galeon vowed. "Not while I have breath in me."

"I'm not worried about myself." Della turned toward Galeon, her face pinching. "When I kissed you before, and last night...you wanted that, didn't you?"

Galeon frowned. "I told you I did."

"And you didn't say that just because I am the princess?"

"I said that because I want you. The princess, yes. Also the witch. And the bad listener."

Della smiled, and Galeon's stomach swooped when Della gently cupped Galeon's throbbing cheek. It twitched under the light contact.

"You should put a compress on this," Della said, her breath fanning over Galeon's skin.

"Mm-hmm," Galeon managed as Della leaned in and replaced her hand with her lips. "Della..."

"Will you just hold me?"

Galeon folded Della in her arms, holding her gently, trying to give but also taking comfort as she buried her nose into Della's neck, ignoring the flaring pain in her face and the heat bubbling in her lower belly.

Footfalls echoing up the steps had them both pulling away. Galeon retreated several hasty paces, and when Sir Alvor stood in the doorway, they were safely on opposite sides of the room.

"The prince has asked for you," Sir Alvor told Galeon grimly.

"He will not punish you, will he?" Della asked, her hands twisting with concern.

Galeon was not certain what to expect, but she didn't have a choice. "Don't worry about me."

"What does he want with her?" Della pressed Sir Alvor sharply. "You saw what happened. Galeon didn't do anything wrong."

"I did see, Princess."

"Walk with me downstairs. Then wait for my return," Galeon said to Sir Alvor.

If Galeon returned.

Galeon looked at Della, memorizing her, hoping this was not the last time she would see her. She wouldn't think about it. Della moved toward

her, but Galeon turned and followed Sir Alvor down the steps before she did anything else reckless.

She walked to the prince's chambers in a daze, her feet following the familiar path with ease. Her hand knocked on the doorframe.

Prince Valin paced back and forth alone near his own balcony. "Come in, Gal. And shut the door."

Galeon obeyed, her boots weighing her down as she stepped forward into the space. A mixture of trepidation, old loyalty, and rage boiled in Galeon's gut as she observed her prince. His face was still red from where Della had slapped him. Good.

Galeon's own face smarted.

He appeared to have calmed down, as was his way. His bursts of temper were frequently short-lived, but it didn't matter. The thought of him raging at Della—of how that scene might have played out—made Galeon want to grind the marble walls to dust.

"Thank you," Prince Valin finally said, his eyes falling to the side of Galeon's face that she was certain was also discolored. "For stepping in."

"You entrusted me to protect her," Galeon replied, struggling to keep her voice even. "And I shall." *Even from you* hung in the air between them, unspoken.

"Yes, I know. That is why I trust you. You saved me from doing something unforgivable."

Galeon did not think she could forgive him as it was, but it was not her place to forgive. That was for Della to do.

He ran a hand over his face, mumbling through it. "How is she?"

"Upset," Galeon answered honestly.

The prince slumped. "I fucked up, Gal."

He certainly had done that.

Galeon wasn't sure what to do with the shamefaced man whom she wanted to comfort and slam through the wall at the same time. Despite her disgust at what he had done and tried to do, Galeon had a hard time turning away from the one person who had been her life's purpose for ten years.

“What should I do?” Prince Valin asked.

“I don’t think I’m the right person to ask.”

“But you are. You know her better.”

Galeon swallowed as the memory of Della’s lips and body pressed against her own flooded her. Then the memory of Prince Valin kissing Della had the bile rising.

When had Galeon’s simple, straightforward life become so terribly messy?

“I should never have gone near Lady Clayton,” Prince Valin muttered.

“I do not believe that is what she is upset about, Your Highness.”

“And I should probably be glad. But I hate it. Shouldn’t she be upset by it? She’s going to be my wife and she doesn’t care she found me with another woman?”

Perhaps it was because Della had just been kissing Galeon in the hallway.

“You are still the one I trust most. Tell me what you would do,” Prince Valin said.

Galeon pushed away her storm of emotion and straightened her spine. What did she want for Della?

“Spend some time with her. Get to know her. Perhaps a connection will grow, but don’t force anything. Give it time.”

“The wedding is only days away.”

“And a marriage will be for much longer. If you are lucky.”

Was Galeon really suggesting the soon-to-be husband of the woman she was in love with try harder?

Della deserved as much. And so much more.

“You are right,” Prince Valin said on a sigh as he stared at Galeon. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Cool moisture ran down and pooled in the small of Galeon’s back. She waited to be dismissed, but Prince Valin said nothing. Something haunted flickered in his expression, setting the hairs on Galeon’s neck on end.

“What is it, Your Highness?” Galeon asked when he continued to say nothing.

Prince Valin paced to his window, looking out. He fiddled with the ring on his finger.

“There is something I need to say,” he told the window frame. “Something I haven’t told anyone.”

The silence stretched as the ring twirled and the backs of Galeon’s knees grew damp.

“Lady Sophia,” the prince finally whispered.

Galeon frowned. Lady Sophia had been a young foreigner who had captured the prince’s attentions for nearly a year until his engagement to Della had been announced. “It was a tragedy when her ship was lost. What about her?”

“She wasn’t on that ship.”

The prince half turned, watching her.

Then Galeon understood as fresh chills swept her body. Bloodied butter silk and blonde hair in the library.

Galeon must have failed to control her expression as the realization hit her.

“I didn’t mean to do it,” Prince Valin said hurriedly, pleadingly. “I didn’t want her to die. We were...arguing and she fell over the balcony. I panicked.”

Galeon focused on trying to breathe steadily. She didn’t want to believe it, but found it too easy to. Green silk and dark hair replaced the yellow and blonde in Galeon’s mind.

“Don’t look at me like that,” the prince said. “Say something.”

“I’m not sure what to say, Your Highness,” Galeon managed. “What do you want me to do with this knowledge?”

“Keep it.”

Another secret for Galeon to hold. It weighed her down with the others.

“Don’t let me do it again,” Prince Valin said. When Galeon met his gaze, she saw her own fear reflected there. “Sometimes I scare myself, Gal. Keep her safe.”

“I will.” It was a promise Galeon could make with ease.

The prince nodded, his features smoothing as he walked over to his wardrobe. “Well. Good. You may go now.”



DELLA PACED AROUND her room, and then hurried down the stairs for the fifth time. Each time Sir Alvor had greeted her instead of Galeon.

“I will send her up to you, Princess,” Sir Alvor promised yet again.

Della didn’t listen. Galeon was in trouble, and it was all Della’s fault.

Della shouldn’t have slapped the prince. He shouldn’t have kissed her, but she shouldn’t have retaliated like that.

What was taking them so long?

Her slippers wore grooves in the marble steps as she descended again. Her heart sank and her feet stumbled when she saw Sir Daric instead.

“Where is Galeon? Sir Galeon,” Della corrected hastily.

“I believe she is in her room, Princess.”

“You’ve seen her?”

“Just now, yes.” Sir Daric looked confused, and a tiny amount of the tension in Della’s chest eased.

“How is she? She is coming back here, right?” Della hated how needy she sounded.

“I believe so.”

“Send her up to me right away when she does.”

Della retreated to her room again. And she paced. The sun was already low in the sky.

Annet showed up to help Della get ready for the evening.

“What happened?” Annet asked at once.

“What did you hear?”

“That the prince lost his temper with you, and that Sir Galeon is wearing his punch.”

“And why do they say he lost his temper?” Della pressed.

Annet shrugged. “A few speculations. Some that he was jealous of his knight, though which one varies. Some that they saw Lady Clayton in a state of undress. Nothing confirmed and all deliciously confused gossip.”

“There’s nothing delicious about it.”

“So tell me what happened.”

“I slapped him.”

“Good.”

“No, not good. Because now Galeon is in trouble because she stopped him from returning the favor.”

Annet stilled and her expression turned cold. “He tried to hit you?”

“I’m not sure, but he didn’t get the chance. And now...”

Panic swelled again. Della glanced back at the stairs.

“Well, at least you know she’s loyal to you. Are you still going tonight?”

Della didn’t want to go, but she wouldn’t let him stop her. She would put on another show and pretend everything was fine. If rumors were flying already, she wouldn’t give them more weight by not showing up tonight.

“She hasn’t come back,” Della whispered. “It’s been most of the day.”

“I’m sure Sir Galeon can take care of herself.” Annet held up the purple gown. “Let’s get you ready.”

Della let Annet help her, but she didn’t wear the purple, instead pulling out a deep red gown that showed far too much skin. She wore all her hair long and chose the most ostentatious tiara. If people were talking, she’d give them something to talk about.

Sir Daric was the one to escort her. Della hid her disappointment by raising her chin as the young man blushed to match her gown but kept his eyes respectfully averted.

“Do you like my outfit, Sir Daric?” Della asked.

“You look...The prince is very lucky, Princess.”

Della’s insides twisted. The prince would never be lucky like that. But it wasn’t Sir Daric’s fault.

“Have you heard from Sir Galeon?” Della asked.

“Nothing new.”

The prince was already seated in the banquet hall when they arrived. To Della’s dark delight, his jaw was slightly swollen beneath the shadow of a forming bruise. Just as he looked toward her, a wonderfully familiar voice spoke at her side. “Thank you, Sir Daric.”

Then the arm Della held was replaced with the only one she wanted.

Della’s heart went on a journey, leaping with happiness and relief at seeing her, then sinking when she saw the injury marring Galeon’s face.

Della wanted to drag Galeon away from here. To hold her and kiss her hurt better. She wanted to talk to her and make sure she was all right. Instead, what came out of Della’s mouth was an accusation.

“Where have you been all day?”

Galeon glanced at her but did not answer as they approached Della’s seat beside the prince. He was avoiding Della’s gaze.

Galeon helped her into her chair. It wasn’t necessary but Della wanted any excuse to keep touching her.

Instead of retreating to her wall, Galeon stood two paces away, her shoulders set with tension, like a cat ready to pounce. Della raised an eyebrow at her questioningly, but Galeon would not meet Della’s gaze either. Disquiet slithered through Della and she turned to the prince. Too many other, unwanted pairs of eyes watched them. She forced a smile.

“Good evening,” she said politely.

“Good evening.” He glanced at her warily as she continued to smile.

The meal was painfully long. Lady Clayton sat nearby, drawn and downcast, barely touching her food as her husband talked animatedly to her.

The musical concert would be hosted back in the ballroom. Before Della tried to stand, Galeon was there, offering her hand. Della's heart flipped, but Galeon was still not meeting her eyes.

"What happened?" Della asked, her question lost to anyone else under the sounds of chairs and feet and voices as they all made their way out of the room.

"Not here," Galeon said, echoing what she had told her earlier after stealing Della's breath against the wall with her passionate kiss.

Lady Clayton stood off to the side, waiting for everyone else to pass. Della hesitated, and then walked determinedly over to her.

"Princess." Lady Clayton flushed and skittered away.

"Will you walk with me?" Della asked, catching up and linking her arm through a subtly trembling one.

After a few tense steps, Lady Clayton spoke. "I don't know what to say, other than to assure you that I will be leaving tomorrow."

"I won't hear of it. You shall stay."

Lady Clayton paled even further. "I really think it best if I leave."

"What are you afraid of? The prince?"

The lady shook her head. "You."

"I am not angry. There is nothing to be angry over. After all, nothing happened, did it?"

"No," Lady Clayton agreed quickly. "Nothing happened."

"That's right."

They entered the ballroom together. Galeon walked at Della's back, so close she would trip if Della hesitated. Della didn't mind, but it did confuse her.

Della smiled warmly at Lady Clayton, feeling the attention of many upon them, then went to take her place beside the prince. He was also eyeing her.

"If you want to punish me, you are doing a good job of it," he said, his eyes raking over her. Della continued to smile as she took her seat.

RELIEF WASHED OVER Galeon as the last strains of music faded and applause tittered through the room. Galeon hadn't heard a single note. She needed to get Della away. She was too near him.

Galeon noticed people staring at the prince-shaped mark on her face. She didn't care about their curiosity. What they were saying about Della, though, she did care about.

Galeon should not have been surprised that Della sought out Lady Clayton. If rumors were circulating, as Galeon knew they would be, her display of friendship would put some to bed.

Della stood and Galeon was there to offer her arm. Galeon avoided the prince's gaze as he bid them a polite good night.

Galeon's world had shifted. Everything she thought she believed, she was no longer sure of. She had been grappling with reconciling the man she knew with the one she had seen today. They were one and the same, yet looked entirely different now. The careful security of the life she had built was collapsing around her.

The pressure of Della's hand on her arm grounded Galeon. One thing Galeon did know was that she would do anything for the woman at her side.

She relaxed slightly when they were alone in the hall, where the night croaked and whispered soothingly beyond the open windows.

"Why didn't you come back?" Della asked, sounding hurt.

"I needed a little time."

Della pressed closer. "I was worried sick all day."

Galeon hated that. "I'm sorry." Now she was guilty for that as well.

It had not been the best day of Galeon's life.

Galeon was glad when Della continued up the steps with her and they emerged into her private room. The world fell away, and they were truly alone as the door closed.

Galeon folded Della into her embrace. And for the first time since that morning, she knew peace. She might not have seen Della since, but she

had never been absent from her thoughts.

“Tell me what happened,” Della said.

Galeon couldn’t tell her all of it. “He, um. He thanked me.”

“Thanked you?”

“He regretted it and was glad it was me and not you who...you know.”

The thought of him putting his hands on Della had Galeon’s pulse leaping again. The panic and fear of the day clambered up in her throat. She needed to get Della away from this place. This place that was home to both of them.

“What is this?” Della asked, her attention catching on the table beside the door.

Galeon followed her gaze. “A book.”

“Yes, I see that.” Della leaned over and picked it up. She stared at the cover, then back at Galeon.

“It’s my favorite. I thought you might want me to read tonight. I had it sent up earlier. Would you like that?”

Della hugged the book to her chest and nodded.



DELLA TRIED TO BEHAVE as Galeon settled on the end of the sofa and Della sat beside her. She really did want to hear the story.

Galeon flipped open the book, her strong hands supporting and caressing the binding. As Galeon’s voice cascaded over her, Della shifted closer, eliminating the gap between their bodies. She was not listening to the words.

Della rested her hand on Galeon’s thigh. Muscles clenched beneath leather. As Della let her hand drift higher, Galeon’s speech faltered.

“Della...” Galeon warned.

“What?” Della asked innocently.

Galeon cleared her throat and tried another sentence but didn’t get far.

Della refocused her attention from Galeon’s thigh to her face. She reached up and turned Galeon’s head toward her, cradling the tender and

swollen cheek. She ran the pad of her finger over the corner of Galeon's mouth where her lip had split.

It should not have aroused her, but it suddenly did, knowing Galeon had suffered this pain for her. Della curled her fingers possessively around Galeon's jaw as she leaned in and pressed her mouth to the corner of Galeon's.

Galeon's breath hitched, and Della smiled slightly as she pulled back.

"Mine," something inside Della sang silently. *"Mine, mine, mine."*

Galeon looked at her with an answering intensity and Della knew she hungered too.

Della kept her mouth hovering so close to Galeon's, letting their breaths mingle, daring Galeon to do it. To decide. To kiss her first this time.

Galeon surged forward, crashing their mouths together. And Della's heart soared.

The book fell to the floor with a soft thud as Della climbed onto Galeon, pushing her back so she was sprawled over the arm of the sofa.

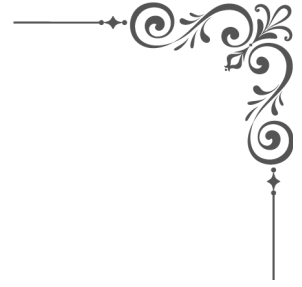
Della hated the barrier of Galeon's armor. She wanted it gone but was too preoccupied by Galeon's roaming hands to bother.

Della framed Galeon's face and dove into her mouth, demanding entry, and Galeon surrendered it. Della wanted everything from her. Every piece of Galeon. She wanted her split lips and her stoic thoughtfulness and her bad listening.

Della rocked her hips down as Galeon gasped, threading her fingers into Della's hair.

They locked eyes. For a moment, Della saw panic in Galeon's, but then brushed that thought away. As she leaned in, Galeon's words stopped her.

"Run away with me."



CHAPTER 21

DARING ACCUSATIONS

As Della stilled, Galeon's heart did too.

Fear had driven the reckless words from Galeon's mouth. And they were out there now, baring Galeon's soul to Della and leaving her more exposed than baring her body ever could.

"What?" Della breathed.

"Run away with me, Della." Galeon had sworn her impossible fantasies would never be spoken, but she was breaking all her vows today. "We'll go somewhere far away, to a new kingdom. Change our names. Be together."

Della shifted off Galeon's lap, pulling away. "How could you ask me that?"

Galeon felt the last scrap of land beneath her feet crumble. Despair washed around her knees and it threatened to drown her. She pushed herself up to sitting, the brocade and oiled wood of the sofa slippery.

"Because I—well, I..." Galeon's throat closed, and words failed.

It was just as well. What could she say? Of course, Della wouldn't want that. Wouldn't want her. Shame burned hot, along with the fear.

"You know I cannot just leave," Della said, standing abruptly and turning her back to Galeon.

Galeon's shaking hands fumbled the book as she tried to pick it up off the floor. "I understand." Galeon swallowed around the boulder in her throat. "Please forgive me. I'll go."

She stood on unsteady legs and somehow managed to get to the door without falling on her face.

"Galeon, wait," Della called, but Galeon blinked through the tears and didn't stop.

It was too much. It was all too much. Galeon cracked as the remaining foundation of her world fractured.

She made it a few steps down when Della caught her shoulder. Galeon could have pulled away, but she didn't, letting Della stop her. She was glad it was dark. She couldn't see much anyway through the water clouding her vision.

"Forget I said that," Galeon pleaded as Della turned her around, sharing the step and backing Galeon against the tower wall.

Della's hands cupped her face and Galeon knew Della felt the dampness there. Galeon wanted to jerk away and run, but she remained where she was. She allowed Della to see her ugly, bleeding heart.

"If things were different," Della whispered, lightly brushing Galeon's tears away and smoothing them into her cheeks.

The phrase helped calm the storm in Galeon. She knew Della couldn't run away with her. She'd always known it, but her desperate panic had temporarily forgotten—or just didn't care.

Galeon met Della's soft kiss with her own and her chest actually ached. Della pressed their foreheads together, their noses grazing, a few of Galeon's tears transferring to Della's skin. It was more intimate than the kiss, and made Galeon want to cry harder.

"Come back upstairs," Della said, slipping her hands down to curl around Galeon's. "Please. I want to hear your favorite story. Will you give me another chance to listen?"

Galeon nodded, and she did. She always would.



DELLA DRAINED HER GOBLET of wine as a pair of nobles played a lawn game in the gardens, rolling a ball over the ground. It seemed rather pointless to Della, but she clapped with everyone else.

The late summer sun was shielded by a light layer of clouds, but it was still too hot. And Della wanted to be anywhere else as her loathsome fiancé approached her.

"You look beautiful today, Cordelia," Prince Valin said with a smile. Even though it wasn't her name, Della still prickled with indignation at his familiar use of it. "Walk with me."

He tucked her hand into his arm. Della almost pulled away, but she followed as he led her on a short tour around the green. The wedding was only two days away. She could deal with him until then.

Galeon's presence at her back made her feel better.

"I don't wish for us to begin our marriage like this," Prince Valin said as they walked.

"Neither do I," Della agreed.

"I was wrong." The words came out a bit off, as if they were foreign to his tongue.

Della waited, but that was all he said.

"About what, Your Highness?" Della prompted.

"About..." He glanced over toward Lady Clayton, and then back at Galeon. "I apologize."

Della wanted to laugh, but it didn't matter.

"Thank you. Let's start again, then. Again."

The prince stared at her. Then looked at Galeon as if asking for her to tell him everything would be fine. And Della suddenly saw what their relationship really was.

The prince was a lost boy drifting, and Galeon was his anchor. Della might hate the prince, but Galeon still cared for him in her own big-hearted, steadfast way. Della hoped they would be able to support each other when she was gone. Her stomach knotted as they returned to the shade of the open tent standing beside the nonsense game.

"Will you play a few rounds with me?" Prince Valin asked Della.

"I am afraid I'm a bit forgetful of the rules."

"I would be honored to play with you, Your Highness," Lord Clayton offered quickly with a deep bow. Prince Valin looked irritated but followed the man to the game area.

Della turned to Galeon. "I need another drink." But before she could move, a liveried boy approached her. He did not, however, carry the wine she wanted.

“Princess,” he said with a bob. “Your maid says you forgot your bracelet today.”

Della stiffened, her eyes quickly scanning for Annet and finding her hovering just off the path to the palace.

“Yes, thank you,” Della barely remembered to say as she started walking. A few paces away from Annet, Della slowed and looked at Galeon who was on her heels. “You don’t need to stand so close.”

Galeon flinched, but then her lovely face smoothed as she took a step back, giving Della space. Della didn’t want space from Galeon, but she needed it. She’d make it up to her later.

“Tell me,” Della murmured, holding out her wrist for Annet.

“Two nobles just arrived from Hevalon,” Annet whispered as she withdrew a beaded gold bracelet and pretended to have an issue with the clasp.

“Shit.” Della’s pulse raced. The real princess had assured them no Hevalon nobles would attend the wedding. Della had been right to be skeptical. “Do you have names?”

“Lord Blye and Sir Demour.”

“What do we know about them?”

“Nothing much. They rolled in saying they had important information.”

“Do you think they know?” Had one of Princess Cordelia’s guards let something slip?

“I don’t know. But I’ve already started gossiping about how they like to drink and exaggerate. One is older and very thin. The other has dark hair and a stocky build.”

“Good. Thank you.”

“Should you faint or fall ill?”

“That will only delay it. And call that horrid physician. Best to get it done with, I suppose.”

“What’s your plan?” Annet asked, letting go of the easy clasp.

Della smiled as she stepped back. She didn't have a plan. "What else? Lie."



GALEON EYED THE TWO Hevalon men on the edge of the lawn. The other nobles were giving them a wide berth, conversations rippling behind fans and sideways glances. The prince had greeted the newcomers briefly, his smile tight as he observed their coats cut of rich Hevalon blue.

Della had inserted herself into a cluster of ladies the same time they arrived and seemed not to have noticed them. But the men had noticed her. They kept looking over at Della, nods and whispers exchanged. Galeon didn't like it. Something was off.

Galeon caught Sir Daric's eye and motioned him over. "Watch her." Then Galeon walked directly to the men.

"Can I help you, my lords?" Galeon asked, keeping her tone neutral. She intentionally waited a moment before offering a bow and introducing herself. "Sir Galeon."

The older of the men turned and looked her up and down. "And you are...part of the prince's guard?"

"I am head of it." Galeon noticed the raised eyebrow, but she didn't care what he thought of her.

"Good. We need to speak with your prince."

"He is engaged, currently." Galeon gestured to where the prince had started another game with Lord Clayton. "May I assist you instead?"

"It is a delicate matter. Relating to his bride," the younger man said, leaning forward as if to speak conspiratorially, but not bothering to keep his voice down.

The prince heard. Along with everyone else. The prince paused his game and joined them as the chatter around the lawn quieted.

"What is going on?" the prince asked.

"Your Highness." The younger man bowed deeply. "I feel it is my duty to inform you that your bride is not in attendance."

Silence fell in the wake of that statement. Then Della also appeared with Sir Daric, joining their small group at the center of everyone's attention.

"Lord Blye, Sir Demour," Della said, her smile brittle. "Forgive me for not greeting you earlier. But I did not expect your presence here."

She stared at them imperiously. When neither of them bowed, Galeon scowled.

"Aren't you going to greet your princess and my future queen properly?" Prince Valin asked, a warning chilling his voice.

"I would," the older man said, drawing himself up to his full height. "But this is not our princess."

Shocked murmurs rippled around the onlookers. Galeon stepped toward the offensive man, her hand going to her sword.

"Are you questioning my legitimacy?" Della asked, her expression pinching with delicate confusion. "Or are you implying I am...what? An imposter?" She laughed, and it rang around the rapt garden. "Wouldn't that be something. Oh, you always did enjoy a good fancy. But this is more impertinent than your usual sort."

"Shockingly impertinent," the prince agreed, frowning at the two men. "Is this Hevalon's idea of a joke? I do not care for it."

"It is no joke, Your Highness. We dined with Princess Cordelia several months back. This woman is not her."

"How dare you." Prince Valin echoed Galeon's thoughts exactly, and she drew her sword.

"You disappoint me, Lord Blye," Della said as the sun broke through the clouds and flashed violently off the jewels in her tiara. "Perhaps all that wine has finally affected your judgment. I find I do not care for your joke anymore either." She turned to Prince Valin, taking his arm. "I would like to play that game with you now. You look so very handsome out on the pitch. Will you remind me of the rules?"

Prince Valin looked startled, but then smiled at Della, caught up in the fond look she was giving him. It twisted Galeon's insides to see it. "Of

course, my dear.” He glanced dismissively at the two nobles before turning away. “Take care of them, Gal.”

“But...” the younger man started to say.

Galeon moved into his face. Sir Alvor and Sir Daric flanked her, surrounding the pair.

“Don’t be hard on them,” Della said. “Perhaps they meant well. But I’d rather not see them at our wedding.”

“You will remove yourselves from this palace,” Galeon stated, all pretense of deference gone as anger simmered in her gut. How dare they. Galeon didn’t know what they were hoping to achieve, but she would not tolerate the insult they’d just paid Della. “We will see you out.”

They tried to protest, but Galeon did not listen to their bluster as she ushered them away. She glanced back to see Della and the prince on the pitch. She was still touching him, pressing her lush body into his arm as she bent forward. It made Galeon’s strides longer.

Galeon gave the escort of the two Hevalon men over to Sir Lamora and her palace guard, and then hesitated. The palace guard didn’t need her, but she could still follow. Then she wouldn’t have to return and see Della’s affection given so easily to the prince. Had Della forgiven him already? Surely not.

Did Galeon *want* her to forgive him? Galeon didn’t know.

Her feet were already carrying her back to the garden. She couldn’t leave Della alone with him. Not that they actually were alone. But what if...

She forced herself not to run while chastising herself for being irrational.

The game had barely started by the time Galeon returned. Della threw a perfect shot, and the prince looked taken aback. Galeon fought a smile when she saw Della’s secret smirk, before unease wound around her gut.

Della was intelligent, but she was also stubborn and impulsive. It would be just like her to do something like win against the prince. Galeon’s unease loosened as Della proceeded to lose the game, sighing and congratulating the prince on his victory when it was over. As several other

nobles bid to be his next match, Della slipped away. She came straight to Galeon.

“They should be gone now,” Galeon assured her.

“Good.”

“You should not have to hear such absurd things said.”

Della shrugged, looking slightly uncomfortable. “Let’s forget about them.” Della took Galeon’s arm. “I do believe there is a delightfully private grotto near the lower wall.”

“Della...we can’t,” Galeon protested, though the idea of what they could do there had her heart pounding.

“Can’t what? Look at it?” Della’s feigned innocence was ruined by the wicked amusement in her eyes.

“You don’t want to just look.”

“Maybe I do.” Della slowly swept her gaze down Galeon’s body, and heat followed the trail of her eyes.

Galeon was tempted. She was tempted to forget the setting and the consequences and take Della to the grotto, to give anything she wanted. But Galeon couldn’t forget.

Instead of letting Della guide her down the dangerously deserted path, Galeon turned them so they strolled around the outskirts of the green in the route they had walked earlier with the prince.

“Everyone is watching,” Galeon said.

“And why do you care?” Della’s voice held an edge.

“You know why.”

Della sighed when Galeon wouldn’t rise to her bait. “It won’t matter long, anyway.”

Galeon did rise to that, her chest tightening. “What does that mean?” What was Della trying to say?

“Nothing. Never mind.”

Galeon took several steadying breaths. Della was in a confusing, infuriating mood.

Della squeezed her arm. "Sorry," she muttered.

"It's fine."

"No, it isn't. Will you let me make it up to you tonight?"

"And how would you do that?"

"You know how." Della pressed closer, the swell of her breast pressing into Galeon's arm and making Galeon nearly stumble over her feet.

"The prince has his groom's party tonight."

Della's teasing vanished. "Oh yes. I forgot."

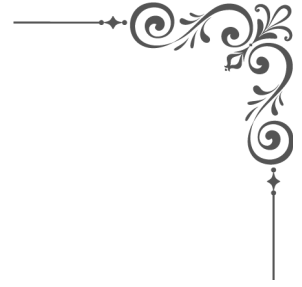
Prince Valin had told Galeon he wanted her presence. Galeon had agreed because she could not refuse. But now she wished there was a way she could.

"Will you come up to see me when you are free?" Della asked.

"It will be late."

Della looked away.

"But I will be there in the morning as soon as you wake," Galeon added. "I promise."



CHAPTER 22

THE WORST WEDDING GIFT

Della stared unseeing at her reflection as Annet tugged and yanked at her hair. A few strains of music drifted up to them through the open balcony doors. The ball had started, spilling out onto the terrace and washing the whole palace in sound.

“Are you ready?” Annet asked.

Della nodded, but it was a lie.

The wedding was tomorrow. And Della was going to die tonight. Technically, tomorrow morning early, but it meant the same thing. Their time was up.

“You’ll cause quite the stir,” Annet said.

Della’s gown glittered with thousands of silver beads. It was a rather stunning piece. Della didn’t care about causing a stir except in the loins of one lady knight. Della smiled to herself, imagining Galeon’s reaction.

“What about your knight?” Annet asked as if reading her thoughts.

“What about her?”

“How is she going to take tomorrow?”

Della’s gut twisted. “She will be fine. I’m going to send her away tonight, so she isn’t the one here in the morning. Now, are *you* ready?” Della asked, and Annet nodded.

“The driver will have the carriage waiting at midnight.”

“And I’ll be watching and ready.” Della pulled Annet into a tight hug.

“Don’t crush your gown,” Annet scolded.

Della hugged her tighter and Annet squeezed back. “I’ll see you from the other side.”

“Don’t spy on me too much from over there.”

“No promises.”

Della let Annet leave first, hastily pulling down a few more strands of hair, and then followed.

Galeon waited, her armor shining brighter than usual. Galeon had also been at Della's stairs at dawn as promised. Della had wanted to drag Galeon up to the privacy of her room and spend all day locked up together, but the time disappeared too quickly between a final dress fitting, and then a luncheon, and then getting ready. Now Della's body flushed as Galeon's gaze raked her.

"Sir Galeon," Della purred as she accepted Galeon's arm.

"Princess," Galeon replied with a private tilt to her mouth. A mouth Della desperately wanted to kiss. Later.

They walked through the halls, following the sounds of the music to the rumbling ballroom. Hundreds of candles lit the space, joining the warm glow of the fading sun, and casting everything in a romantic light.

It was terribly enchanting. But the charm dimmed as Della's groom approached and Della reluctantly let him take her hand.

"Dance with me, Princess?" Prince Valin asked. "It will be expected."

"Of course," Della agreed, and he led her onto the dance floor, which cleared rapidly for them.

Prince Valin pulled her close, planting a hand on her waist, and Della didn't even punch him. She turned off her brain and her senses and did her best to follow his steps. She hadn't danced often, but he was a competent lead. She could give him that.

He spun her around the floor, and everyone clapped as the song ended. She tried to pull away, but he held firm. "I have a surprise for you, my dear," he said, a pleased smile on his lips. "A familiar face for tomorrow."

Nothing about that statement could be anything good. Sinking dread swept Della as she slowly turned to follow his gaze behind her.

Prince Henrik, Crown Prince of Hevalon, stood at the edge of the crowd. And he was looking straight at Della.

Her heart stopped. He was dressed head to toe in rich blue, a yellow gold crown set in his black hair which Della's was dyed to mimic. Della

could lie her way out of a lot of things. But not this.

Why was he here? Would he expose her? How much time did she have?

She frantically scanned the room and found Annet standing discreetly by the door. She must have heard of the new arrival as well, but too late. No matter what, Della had to complete their bargain. She had promised and Annet had sealed it.

If Della pulled out her soul right now, it would certainly be public. Would it be enough to keep Annet safe? But they would see Della's glow as she died. They would know there was magic in the palace.

Della stood rooted to the spot as Prince Henrik approached. He nodded at Prince Valin and then returned his attention to Della. "Well, don't I get a hug hello from my baby sister?"

He opened his arms, a challenge in his eyes as his mouth smiled.

Della had never paid much attention to accounts of Hevalon's prince, which she regretted now. Every instinct in Della told her to get away as she stepped forward and accepted his brief hug. For a moment, she expected him to do something wild like stab or restrain her, but of course, he just let her go.

"You weren't expecting me, were you?" he asked, dark amusement in his question.

Della finally found her voice. "I was not, Brother."

If he was going to keep up the charade, so was she. Heart in her throat, she tried not to trip as he drew her away from Prince Valin, hand going to her waist as a song started.

"You seem tense, Sis," he commented lightly.

She met his gaze. "What do you want? Have you come to stop me?"

"On the contrary." He spun her away and back in, which didn't help Della's uneasy stomach. "I am here to make sure you do exactly as you promised."

"How much do you know?"

“Enough. When I learned of my sister’s harebrained scheme, it was too late to stop it. So I came to make sure it doesn’t start the war we’ve been trying to prevent.”

“And what does that entail, exactly?” Della clarified.

“The only way out is through. I can’t let you marry Valin as my sister. And I also can’t have your death incite Hevalon to attack.”

“The princess specified it would be a peaceful death.”

Prince Henrik arched an eyebrow. “My sister has many delightful qualities, but sound planning is not one, unfortunately. Do you think anyone will care about the details when it’s announced she died in Glea? On the eve of her wedding? Don’t you understand what you did when you agreed to her selfish plot?”

Della looked again at Annet and gave her a tiny nod of reassurance. “I knew exactly what I was doing,” Della breathed. “Surviving.”

The song ended, and Della pulled away as couples refilled the space in a twirl of colors, swish of fabric, and click and brush of steps on the polished floor. Prince Henrik receded into the crowd.

Della reached for Galeon, who was there when Della needed, as always. So dependable and solid. Della couldn’t think about losing her, so she didn’t think of it.

“You haven’t spoken much of your brother,” Galeon said. “I didn’t know you were close.”

“We aren’t.”

They walked over to the side of the room and Della accepted an annoyingly dainty goblet from a servant before pressing it on Galeon and taking another.

“I shouldn’t drink this,” Galeon said.

“I know. It’s not for you. It’s for me when I finish this.” Della gulped half her wine. It soothed her throat and she went back for more.

She caught Galeon’s eye, expecting to see reproach there, but found none. Just a gentle warmth that flickered with repressed heat. Della smiled again, and this time, there was nothing forced about it.

“Dance with me,” Della said, standing too close to Galeon.

“My hands are full.”

Della plucked the second goblet from Galeon and downed it. She handed it to someone nearby without even looking at who it was, and then took Galeon by the elbow.

“People are watching,” Galeon protested as she pulled Della into her arms, her hold supportive and the most natural thing in the world.

“I don’t care.” Della curled her hand around Galeon’s and the other over the metal of her shoulder, in front of both princes and many other onlookers.

“They will talk,” Galeon murmured, leading Della into the steps.

“Let them.”

Galeon uttered Della’s name the way she did when Della was being unreasonable.

“We aren’t doing anything wrong,” Della protested.

Yet.

Della had one night left. She didn’t want to spend it anywhere other than in Galeon’s arms. Her heart hammered faster. Their time was slipping away, and she couldn’t stand for it to end. But it would.

Nothing would stop her. Not one prince or two. Not even a pretty knight. Not even a gorgeous, loyal, wonderful woman in dreadful armor.

“I want you,” Della breathed in Galeon’s ear. “Tonight.”

Galeon didn’t reply, though the grip on Della’s waist tightened in understanding.

“Things will change soon,” Della warned.

“I know.” Galeon drew Della closer as they stepped past another couple.

“We might only have tonight. I will always regret it if we let it pass. Won’t you?”

Perhaps Della was more like Princess Cordelia than she’d thought. Della knew it was a selfish thing to ask. She couldn’t give Galeon more

than tonight. But Della had never claimed to be selfless or even good. Galeon knew that already, yet here she was.

The song ended, and Prince Valin approached. Galeon slipped from Della's arms and bowed, yielding Della to him. It should not have hurt.

Galeon had not answered. Frustration welled in Della's chest, but she swallowed it as she allowed Prince Valin to claim Galeon's place. For now. One more dance. She could make it through one more dance.

"Are you looking forward to tomorrow?" Prince Valin asked her.

"I am prepared for it." Della wasn't speaking of their never-to-be wedding.

"You will be the most beautiful bride in all of Glea."

Della wanted to laugh at his flattery. Did he think that would work? "Thank you. You will be quite handsome yourself."

The song ended, and then they danced another. And another. The evening slipped away into night. Prince Henrik loomed on the edges of the floor. Della's eyes frequently reached out for Galeon, and Galeon always met her, which helped some.

Della's feet were comfortable in her shoes—the shoes Galeon had given her. It seemed so long ago. Della smiled. Prince Valin, mistaking the cause, smiled back. It didn't matter.

The drink loosened Della's body and the room and lights blurred around her. Twirl, swish, click.

"You have worn me out, Your Highness," Della said as she withdrew from his grasp after what felt like the hundredth song ended. "Thank you for the ball. I should get some rest. Big day tomorrow."

Prince Valin bowed over her hand, lingering. Everyone was watching them again.

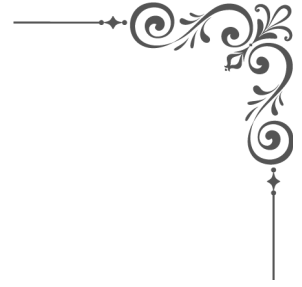
"A good night kiss for your groom?" he asked.

Della wanted to refuse. She wanted to slap him again. Instead, she gritted her teeth and turned her face to the side, presenting him with her cheek.

Applause and pleased laughter rippled around them as he pressed unwelcome lips to her skin. Della stepped back and into Galeon. Della reached for her arm to erase the feeling of the prince's mouth on her.

“Take care of her, Gal,” Prince Valin said.

“I will, Your Highness.”



CHAPTER 23

WITHOUT REGRET

Della's heart raced ahead of her as they slowly approached her tower. Galeon hadn't said a word since they'd left the ballroom, and Della didn't know what her carefully blank expression meant. Was Galeon going to reject her? The thought made Della ill and kept her mouth closed as well.

They reached the stairs.

"Well?" Della asked, heart in her throat as she paused on the third step.

Galeon stared up at her. Then she placed one foot on the lower step.

Della grinned, warmth permeating her chest at the acceptance. She turned and hurried on, the sound of Galeon behind her sending anticipation through her body.

She moved to the windows first, then the balcony, drawing the curtains and shutting out the world. Galeon lingered near the door and for a moment, Della worried she had changed her mind, but the way she watched Della drove that thought away. Della sauntered back over to her, not stopping until she covered Galeon's mouth with her own.

Galeon responded at once, cupping the back of Della's head to hold her steady while hungrily tasting her mouth, her cheek, her jaw.

"Take this off," Della said, hooking one finger in the top of Galeon's breastplate and tugging. "I want to feel you. All of you."

Galeon's breath left in a rush, and it tickled Della's chin.

Galeon unclasped one of her gauntlets. "This is dangerous," she warned. The second gauntlet released.

"Yes. Take it off."

Pleasure curled as Della watched Galeon shed her armor. Galeon placed each piece down carefully as she revealed more of herself. Della had seen her without armor, but Galeon had been injured then. She wasn't now.

Tonight, Galeon was choosing Della.

The linen undershirt she wore was creased and a bit stained from the oil that treated her chainmail. The collar gaped as she bent to undo her heavy boots. It still hid too much, tucked into her high-waisted pants. Della couldn't wait to feel those hips, so lovingly caressed by well-worn leather. Della would caress them lovingly with her thighs if Galeon would let her.

Then Galeon stood, still fully clothed but free of her armor. She was staggeringly beautiful.

Della turned, presenting the line of laces down her back. "Help me."
"Always."

Della's heart stuttered and then twisted at that word. No, not always. Not even tomorrow. Della focused on the brush of Galeon's fingers as she loosened the gown. The heavy fabric eased and sagged, burdened by its own loveliness, and Della let it slip from her shoulders, falling into a glittering pile around her feet. Della had not worn anything beneath.

She kept her back to Galeon, listening as the pattern of breathing changed behind her.

Hands settled on her bare hips, drawing Della back against Galeon's front. Galeon was so wonderfully warm without the rigid barrier of her armor. Della melted into her, reaching up and tugging at the knot in Galeon's hair to free it. Lips met the skin of Della's neck, brushing over the place where one of her bones had healed improperly.

Galeon explored. Her touch stroked, and cupped, and kneaded, pulling a delighted moan from Della's throat. When Della couldn't stand it anymore, she whirled, walking Galeon backward until her knees hit the bed. Della pushed her down, and then climbed on top of her.

Magic crackled through Della as she slid her hands over the contours of Galeon's muscular arms and pinned Galeon's wrists to the mattress. Della flickered. Her magic was strong, but she would need it tomorrow. It stoked her desire higher.

She had never been intimate with anyone while so charged with magic. It felt different. It was only the magic and had nothing to do with this being Galeon.

Della didn't care if she was lying to herself.

Galeon was beneath her, completely at her mercy. Entirely Della's. Only Della's.

When Galeon inhaled sharply, Della realized she was gripping too tight, leaving indents in Galeon's flesh that would surely bruise.

Della released her at once, horrified by the dark impulses rushing through her body to take what she wanted. "Sorry."

Galeon stared at her with wide eyes.

"Did I hurt you?" Della asked, running a light touch over Galeon's wrist. "I didn't mean—"

Galeon kissed her fiercely, rolling them until Galeon was on top.

Della grinned and tugged at Galeon's shirt. "Off."

Galeon obeyed, drawing it over her head as Della's greedy, desperate hands reached for her.

The rest of Galeon's clothes followed. Della drank in the sight before Galeon enveloped her again and Della soaked up the feeling.

Della could have spent an eternity learning every stretch of skin, the places where smoothness turned to fascinating texture. Where it pebbled slightly, reacting to the cool air and Della's touch.

Della clung to Galeon, clutched at her bunching shoulders, reveled in the muscles down her back.

This was what Della wanted. This was everything. This was Galeon.

Galeon pressed their foreheads together and rocked against her. Della hummed, urging her on as Galeon gripped Della's thigh, hitching her higher. It wasn't elegant or calculated. It was honest and needy and perfect.

Their sighs mingled. Their limbs tangled.

Something cold dragged against Della's chest.



GALEON STILLED AS DELLA'S hand came up and brushed over the locket hanging from around Galeon's neck. Perhaps Galeon should have

removed it, but she never did. The thought disquieted her.

“Does it bother you?” Galeon asked, not sure she wanted to hear the answer. “That I wear it?”

“No,” Della replied without hesitation, sliding her fingers back into Galeon’s loose hair. “She is part of you. You shouldn’t have to hide her or forget. For anyone.”

Tears formed in Galeon’s eyes, and she blinked rapidly. She still loved Lillian, but Galeon only wanted to be with Della tonight.

Galeon kissed Della, trying to thank her for understanding through the sweep of her tongue.

Galeon trembled, memorizing everywhere they connected. Her heart hammered in her chest where it pressed against Della’s. Her skin burned in the best way imaginable. Being so close to Della and truly feeling her was so much more incredible than in Galeon’s fantasies each night.

Loving Della might be wrong, but tonight, Galeon didn’t care. She didn’t care Della was a witch. She didn’t care Della was marrying someone else in the morning. She didn’t care she was betraying her prince. Their lives were too short as it was, and Galeon refused to waste the rest wondering or regretting. She was recklessly, hopelessly in love, and if that made her a fool, then so be it.

Della was deceptively strong, and Galeon found herself on her back again. Galeon liked that.

Then Della dove between Galeon’s legs.

The sound that left Galeon’s throat would have embarrassed her had she been capable of reasonable thought. It had been so long since anyone had been there, and Galeon was more than ready.

“Yes,” Galeon breathed as Della urged her legs wider. “Please.”

And Della did.

Galeon surrendered to her. She bit her tongue and tried to keep quiet as Della sent her running blindly, then flying.

Teeth dug into Galeon’s thigh, then her clenching stomach, then the underside of her breast. Galeon shuddered with pleasure, tumbling off that

indescribable cliff yet again. And again.

This was nothing like the tender experimenting of youth. Della took what she wanted and gave as much. And Galeon loved it. Loved her.

As Galeon caught her breath, Della crawled up her body and burrowed into her neck, purring with pleasure. Light touch danced over Galeon's shoulders and biceps. Della squeezed, and Galeon instinctively flexed, making Della laugh. It was a wonderful sound. Galeon wanted to hear it again.

Breath was unnecessary when she had Della to feast on.

Hooking her hands behind Della's knees, Galeon flipped them once more and was rewarded with a wicked grin. Galeon never wanted Della to stop. Then she grew conflicted when Della bit her lip, arching beneath Galeon's descending hands and mouth, because Galeon never wanted her to stop that either.

Galeon would endeavor to make sure she didn't.



THEY LAY TOGETHER AS the shortest candle in the room guttered out. Galeon draped over Della, her head riding the pattern of her lover's breathing. As Della lazily ran her fingers up and down Galeon's spine, Galeon's repressed tears from earlier slid from her eyes. Galeon wasn't entirely sure what they were for, or if they simply needed to come out.

Galeon's heart was full. She couldn't think about tomorrow, but she would get through it somehow. If this was all they could have, it would be enough. They would make it enough.

But a full heart didn't stop time passing and no matter how much Galeon wanted to spend all night just as she was, she couldn't. Her duty already called to her.

With a line of languid kisses up Della's chest and throat, Galeon sat up.

"Don't go," Della murmured, her hands trailing and lingering as Galeon slipped reluctantly through them.

"I must."

It hurt to turn away. Her clothes slid oddly over her skin as she redressed. Her whole body felt different, like it had been scrubbed clean and raw.

She reached for her armor, which she had once worn for her prince. She no longer did. As Galeon strapped on the pieces of metal, she did so for Della. Galeon would serve Della in whatever way Della needed. Whatever way she wanted.

Della watched her with an aching sadness, and Galeon needed to erase it. She approached the bed, leaning down for one more kiss, which turned into two.

“Galeon,” Della said, sitting up and holding Galeon’s face close, a desperation in her touch.

“It’s all right,” Galeon soothed, running a hand over Della’s wonderfully tousled hair.

“Take the rest of the night off.”

“What? Why?”

“Just do it. Go get some rest. Promise me you will have someone else watch my tower through tomorrow morning.”

“Whatever you say,” Galeon agreed. She didn’t need rest. She was too happy to sleep.

“Remember when I told you I was lying to you?”

“Mm-hmm.” Galeon nuzzled Della’s ear and grinned when Della shivered.

“You aren’t listening to me, are you.”

“Not really,” Galeon admitted, distracted by the very naked woman beneath her eyes and hands.

Della’s grip was firm as she turned Galeon’s face toward her, forcing Galeon to meet her gaze.

“I still cannot tell you what I cannot tell you, but...I want you to know that if things were different, I would have said yes. I would have run away with you.”

Galeon kissed her again. “Then I’ll keep asking. One day, maybe you will.”

Della looked like she was actually going to cry as she nodded and let her hands fall.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Galeon promised before giving her one more kiss, her heart too full to understand why Della told her goodbye instead of good night.



DELLA SAT, FISTS BUNCHED in the rumpled bedspread and listened to Galeon’s footsteps fade. The tears she had been keeping back spilled down her cheeks. For a few moments, she let herself weep. She let herself grieve the warmth she’d had so briefly. The life she could never have.

Galeon had no idea how much her words had torn at Della’s ragged heart. Della had thought about pushing her away with cruelty. About telling Galeon they were over, to set her free before the news of Della’s death reached her tomorrow. But Della couldn’t bring herself to do it. Perhaps she was weak, after all.

Galeon would get over her. Della was not sure she would be able to get over Galeon. She’d find a way, though.

But what if...

Della slammed the door on the hope that one day, once her death had settled, Della might be able to contact Galeon.

Galeon wouldn’t want her. Not after this lie. And it would be an incredibly risky thing to do.

Too many things had to happen between now and then, and none of them involved passionate kisses with Galeon.

Della stood and cleaned up. She didn’t want to remove Galeon’s scent that clung to her skin. Her motions were sluggish, and her mind was dazed as she forced herself not to think about it.

Then she paced.

She blinked with anxious magic. Della was not sure what time of night it was, only that it was late. Too late. And yet, all she wanted now was for

time to speed up and for it to be morning. For it to be time.

Annet promised to find her early. Della should probably try to sleep.

She would sleep while she was dead.

The night crawled onward. The soles of her feet were sore and tender by the time the farthest reaches of the horizon began to lighten.

The first rumblings began of a palace waking. A songbird wailed. The sky brightened.

It was time.

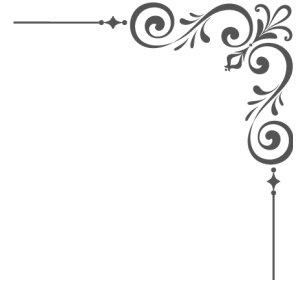
Della finally returned to the bed she had been avoiding, straightening out the last evidence of her lovemaking with Galeon.

Della looked toward the door. She wanted to run down the stairs as she had so many times before, to see Galeon one last time. But she couldn't do that. Galeon wouldn't be there, anyway.

The loud call of the magic was barely audible over the pain of Della's own making.

Della crawled under the covers and arranged herself to appear as peaceful as she could. She turned her face into the pillow which still held a fragment of Galeon's scent. Della breathed one more time.

Then she pulled out her own soul.



CHAPTER 24

TRAGEDIES AREN'T ROMANTIC

Being dead was an odd sensation. Della stared at her body as she walked around it. The floor supported her incorporeal feet, but only if she wanted it to.

Della had done this before under different circumstances, so it was not entirely unfamiliar. Still, it was not pleasant, seeing herself lying unmoving.

Before long, Della heard Annet hurrying up the steps. She emerged in the doorway smiling, walking straight over to the bed to check Della's body. Annet looked up and around, knowing Della was there but unable to see her.

"I felt it release, when you did it. The promise is complete. We are free," Annet whispered.

There had never been a question. Della opened her mouth to reassure her sister, but no sound came out. She had no way to reply.

The magical promise with Princess Cordelia might have been complete, but they still had to get away safely.

"I'm going to scream now," Annet said, and Della nodded uselessly. Then Annet opened her mouth and shrieked so loud the wardrobe rattled, her face screwing up in an impressively convincing expression of horror.

Feet pounded on the stairs. Then Galeon was there.

Della's nonexistent heart flipped, and then it plummeted to the dungeons.

Galeon wasn't supposed to be there. She had promised to take the night off.

"What is wrong?" Galeon asked as she walked into the room, looking between Annet and Della in the bed.

Annet pressed her hands dramatically to her chest, then her face. "The princess is dead!" Annet shrieked, fleeing down the stairs and echoing the call for help.

Color drained from Galeon's face. Della tried to throw herself in the way, but Galeon walked straight through her.

"Della?" Galeon knelt on the bed and reached for her, jerking when she touched Della's hand. Galeon slid their palms together, curling her fingers around Della's when Della's didn't move.

Galeon's voice wavered with heartbreaking hollowness as she spoke to her. "Della, wake up now. It's morning."

If Della had been capable of tears, she would have been crying them.

"It isn't true," Galeon whispered, shaking Della's body as she clumsily gathered her into her arms. "You are lying to me again, aren't you?"

Della watched Galeon stare at her corpse, as the natural denial in Galeon's mind faltered against the evidence before her eyes. But Galeon was stubborn and didn't listen.

"No," Galeon rasped. Her hands tightened, fisting in the fabric of Della's robe. "I won't let you."

Galeon cupped the back of Della's lolling head, pressing a kiss to Della's lifeless lips, and then looked at her, as if expecting her to wake. When Della didn't, Galeon tried again.

She shuddered. A soul-wrenching sound, ripped from somewhere deep and unthinkable, escaped her mouth hovering over Della's unresponsive one.

More feet clattered, and Annet reappeared, followed by Sir Daric.

"The princes are on their way," Annet announced to the room, though Della knew it was for her benefit.

Galeon didn't react as she clutched Della's limp form against her chest. Annet frowned and Sir Daric just looked shocked.

"Sir Galeon, people are coming," Annet repeated, touching Galeon's arm.

Galeon wasn't crying. She wasn't doing anything, her face eerily blank.

"You need to let her go now," Annet said.

"Sir?" Sir Daric tried, taking a tentative step forward.

Galeon ignored them both.

“Let her go,” Annet said more firmly.

Galeon didn’t. She didn’t seem to hear her at all.

Annet shook Galeon’s shoulder. Then she reached out and slapped Galeon’s still-bruised face. Della winced, but it finally got Galeon’s attention, and she met Annet’s gaze with glassy eyes.

“The prince is almost here. Let her go.”

Galeon shook her head mutely.

Sadness flitted across Annet’s face, and then she sighed. “You must.” Annet reached out and pried Galeon’s hands off Della. Galeon looked confused when Annet managed to do it.

“Come on, sir,” Sir Daric said gently, ushering Galeon back a few paces.

Galeon complied, staring now at Annet.

“Are you...are you...” Galeon croaked, but thankfully she didn’t finish her deadly thought as the room became more crowded.

Prince Valin arrived, followed by the annoying physician Della remembered from the hunt.

“Tell me it is untrue,” Prince Valin demanded, staring at Della’s unmoving body, which was slumped unceremoniously on the bed where Annet had dropped her.

“I am afraid, Your Highness—” the physician began but didn’t have time to finish the thought either.

“What happened?” the prince asked, paling as he gazed at Della’s unmoving body. Then he rounded on Galeon, grabbing her by the top of her breastplate, near her throat. “What happened?” Prince Valin yelled in her face.

Galeon stared past him, eyes on Della. When Galeon didn’t reply, the prince shook her, rattling her armor.

“You were supposed to keep her safe,” Prince Valin hissed. “You promised. Answer me!”

“I failed,” Galeon breathed.

Della gasped silently, trying to force her nonexistent self between them as the prince backhanded Galeon, adding another new mark to her battered face. Della tried to scream in fury, but nothing happened.

Galeon’s head moved, but she didn’t flinch.

“Your sword, Sir Alvor,” the prince said, hatred burning in his eyes.

“Your Highness—”

“Now!” the prince ordered, and Sir Alvor didn’t try to protest again. “On your knees.”

Galeon knelt. Her arms hung at her sides. She didn’t resist or attempt to defend herself.

“*Get up!*” Della wanted to scream at Galeon, panic clawing up her missing throat as Prince Valin gripped Sir Alvor’s sword.

Della had to get back. This was all Della’s fault. But she was trapped. Helpless. Useless.

She flew to her body and tried to reconnect, knowing it was pointless. She needed Annet’s touch. But Annet was on the other side of the room.

Della had to do something. She tried to reach inside herself, looking for the magic. But the magic didn’t care about her here. There were no threads. No call. No body.

Desperation spiraled as she tried to break down the walls of mist and nothingness that surrounded her.

Prince Valin drew back the sword.

Della screamed silently, the curdling horror of the moment suspended.

Prince Valin faltered, his face twisting with a jumble of emotions. The unused weapon clanged loudly as it fell to the stone floor.

Galeon didn’t seem to notice. She remained on her knees, eyes on Della’s body.

“Throw her in a cell,” the prince muttered as he turned away, all the fight and rage suddenly drained from his drooping shoulders.

Sir Alvor collected and hastily sheathed his sword, and then he and Sir Daric hauled Galeon up by her arms. Galeon complied, chillingly blank as they led her away. Della was about to go after them when Prince Henrik arrived, flanked by several unfamiliar knights of Hevalon.

The two princes stared at each other in tense silence. Then Prince Henrik walked over to Della's side. He looked down at her for a long moment.

"I...I don't know what happened," Prince Valin stuttered, uncertain, like a lost boy reaching for skirts that were not there.

"I will have to examine her to determine a cause of death, Your Highness," the physician said.

"I have brought my own physician," Prince Henrik said, gesturing, and a middle-aged woman stepped out from behind one of the Hevalon knights. "Though there is no need." Prince Henrik shook his head, wiping at his dry eyes. "It was her heart. We've been told since she was young that she might pass in her sleep one day."

"And you didn't think to say anything about this?" Prince Valin snapped.

Prince Henrik turned a cold gaze to Prince Valin, who deflated.

"This is a shock, and a tragedy," Prince Henrik continued calmly. "And must be dealt with quickly and carefully. Surely you understand that."

Prince Valin nodded.

Prince Henrik shifted his attention to Annet, who was edging toward the door, not quite as unnoticed as she hoped. "Seize her."

His knights clamped short-lived hands around Annet's arms. Della flew at them, silently promising they were dead men if they hurt Annet.

"The maid?" Prince Valin asked.

"She raised the alarm, and I'd rather we be the ones to break the news publicly. Best to keep her out of the way for now, so she can't do anything...rash. Take her to a cell. A metal one."

He knew Annet was a witch. Of course he knew. He wasn't announcing it, but he was making sure Annet could not influence the situation. Or get

to Della.

Della had been so caught up in the confusion of his arrival and her thoughts of Galeon last night, she had completely missed the question of what he would do afterward. And she had her answer now.

Prince Henrik had wanted Della to die. Not to come back.

Annet cast an alarmed look around the room, seeking Della without being able to see her. "It's all right," she breathed. Della only heard because she was right in front of her, trying to pointlessly shield her. "We have time."

The knights holding Annet didn't pay any attention to her words as they ushered her away.

Della followed, refusing to let them out of her sight as they sank into the depths beneath the palace. A Glea knight Della recognized met them and showed them into the dungeons. Annet didn't fight, and Della wished she would. "I'll be fine," Annet repeated, as if she knew Della would be cursing her if she could.

Della shivered at the sound of the heavy iron door slamming as they locked Annet in. The walls down in the dungeon were void of fine, smooth marble, instead made of rough bedrock and earth. A tiny slit up high allowed a shaft of natural light to fall into the space.

When the guards were gone, Annet spoke again. "We'll find a way. We always do. I won't let you down."

As if Annet could let Della down. This was Della's fault, not Annet's. Della should have warned her. They should have changed their plan. They should have...

Someone was coming.

A handsome young man wearing an apron covered in stains and food detritus appeared outside Annet's cell, panting.

"Ben," Annet said, hurrying to the iron barrier. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard the Hevalon bastard had you shut in to keep you quiet." Venom dripped from his voice. He glanced around, and then pulled out something from his pocket, passing it through the bars and pressing it into

Annet's hands. "This is the best I can do. Everyone is on high alert now, but use it later, when things have settled down."

Annet grinned, grabbing his head and pulling it against the bars so she could press a kiss to his lips. "I knew I liked you. I'll never forget this."

"And I'll never forget you, Netty."

Della crossed her shapeless arms, torn between being touched by the scene, disgusted by the way her sister's face was plastered to the flour-crusted man through the bars, and annoyed that he called her Netty too.

"Be careful," Ben said when they finally detached.

"I will. And thank you."

Ben's hands lingered over Annet's, which were wrapped around the bitter iron bars, then he left.

Annet turned a smug look to the air, and Della knew it was meant for her. "So, seducing the cook was helpful, after all." A ring of keys dangled from Annet's finger. "We have our way out. We just need to be patient."

Annet sat on the narrow bench by the wall, making herself as comfortable as was possible in a dungeon. Unfortunately, they had experienced several, and this was far from the worst.

"Go on. I know you want to. I'll be fine."

Della remained until she was satisfied Annet was not in immediate danger. Then she went in search of Galeon, knowing she would have been put somewhere nearby. Annet was in one of the first cells, but the dungeon continued, spiraling into the earth. Della spotted Sir Daric and followed him downward.

"Here you are, sir," the young knight said, carrying a tray of food into the dark cell. This space was void of natural light, and of any sense of hope.

Galeon slumped in the corner. She'd been stripped of her armor and her hair fell loose around her shoulders.

"Not a sir," Galeon murmured, staring blankly at the opposite wall. "Not anymore."

"You'll always be a sir. To us, sir."

“Shouldn’t say that.”

Sir Daric shrugged as he set down the tray, and then he left, locking the door behind him. Della slipped inside, needing to be closer to Galeon. No iron bars would stop her in this form.

Della noticed the item tucked half-hidden beneath the bowl just as Galeon did. She snatched it, knocking the food carelessly over the floor.

Galeon clutched the familiar green ribbon in a white-knuckled fist. Then she finally broke. And it broke Della to see it.

Galeon curled on the damp floor, pressing the ribbon to her nose as she sobbed.

Della wrapped her formless form around her, trying to hold her, trying to soothe her.

This wasn’t supposed to have happened. Galeon wasn’t supposed to have been there. She wasn’t supposed to have cared this much. Della wasn’t supposed to either.

When had everything gone so terribly wrong?

When Della had fallen in love. That must be what this pain was. It wouldn’t hurt so much if it were anything else.

Della didn’t know how long she stayed down in the windowless dungeon with Galeon. She stayed until she couldn’t stand it anymore. She couldn’t stomach Galeon’s pain without being able to do anything about it. Della checked on Annet, who was dozing contentedly, before drifting listlessly through the palace.

She watched as her wedding became a funeral. How tragic, dead on her wedding day. How convenient, everyone was already there.

They dressed her in her bridal finery. Della studied herself somewhat dispassionately as they arranged her on a livery to take her to her tomb. It was far more attention and ceremony around her death than Della ever expected. Because it wasn’t for Della. It was for Princess Cordelia.

The wedding feast was served. Della perched on the table between a silent Prince Henrik and Prince Valin. Prince Henrik dug into his meal as if he hadn’t eaten in days. Prince Valin was pale, the ring on his finger

twirling faster and faster as he stared at nothing, the untouched food on his plate going cold.

Sir Alvor leaned down to speak quietly into his ear. “The queen has been informed, Your Highness.”

Prince Valin’s complexion whitened further. He glanced over his shoulder, instinctively turning to the empty space behind Della’s empty chair. Sorrow pinched his face, but then it hardened into sullenness, and he reached for his wine. The drifting boy had cut loose his anchor.

Della had seen enough. Princes were no longer of consequence in her life or in her death. She went in search of someone who was.



GALEON SHIVERED AGAINST the cold wall of her cell. She leaned into the feeling, grasping at the discomfort of it, at anything she could focus her mind on for a moment that wasn’t the empty despair swallowing her.

Della was gone. Just like that. Just like Lillian. Galeon had held her in her arms and known she was too late. Galeon had failed the person she cared about most. Again.

Galeon wished the prince had followed through with the sword. Then she wouldn’t have to be here, feeling this.

Everything was gone. Her life was already over. She didn’t know what Prince Valin planned to do with her, but she hoped it would be something swift and brutal. The worst punishment would be to just leave her with her own mind. Perhaps that was what she deserved.

How could this have happened? Had Galeon done something wrong without knowing last night? Did it have to do with Della’s magic? Della had been fine—sleepy, but fine—when Galeon had left her...hadn’t she?

Had Della known she was going to die?

That terrible realization hit Galeon like a hammer to the chest. Della had said goodbye. She had told Galeon to take the night off.

Della had known. And she had left Galeon anyway.

Galeon hadn’t thought it possible to cry more, but she managed. She gripped her head and squeezed as if to wring out the thoughts and images repeating over and over and over.

Della, dead.

Lillian, dead.

Galeon had promised to keep them safe.

Galeon had known better than to lose her heart again. She'd been a fool. She should never have left last night. Maybe if she hadn't...

A sound made Galeon look up. She didn't really care who or what it was, but she desperately reached for the interruption to her coiling misery. The single torch flickering in the bracket didn't cast enough light for Galeon to recognize the woman until she was just outside Galeon's cell.

"Annet," Galeon croaked, her voice coming out hoarse. "Has the...the funeral—"

Annet withdrew a ring of keys and slid one into the lock of Galeon's cell. "I need your help," Annet said briskly as she swung the door open. "We must hurry."

Galeon stared up at her. Her body wouldn't move. "Are you a witch too?"

That was probably not the most sensitive question, but Galeon was past caring.

Annet recoiled. "She told you?" She sounded incredulous, and then she muttered to the air. "I'm going to kill you myself, Della."

Galeon shook her head. Then she realized Annet had used Della's name.

"Whatever," Annet said, motioning with her hand. "Just as well, I guess. We don't have much time. Let's go."

Galeon shook her head again, chest hollow. "I don't want to escape."

"This isn't for you. This is for her. Now get up. I need those strong arms of yours."

Annet reached for Galeon and tugged. Galeon finally got her stiff body to work and climbed awkwardly to her feet.

"What are you doing?" Galeon asked, sluggish and dazed as she followed Annet out of the cell. She still clutched Della's favor, and pressed it to her lips once before tucking it in her pocket.

“You shouldn’t let me free,” Galeon protested as Annet hauled Galeon along behind her. Galeon’s mind felt more muddled than when she had hit her head during the stampede.

“Shh. We are trying to sneak.”

Galeon obediently went quiet. The way Annet had spoken reminded Galeon too much of Della. Fresh tears blurred her vision, and she held on tighter to Annet’s hand.

A sound up ahead had Annet shoving Galeon through a side door. Annet pressed a palm over Galeon’s mouth in warning. Galeon wasn’t quite that oblivious, though her heart did accelerate as the unseen person approached and passed. It was the first time that day Galeon had cared about something that might happen to her. She wasn’t sure if she was glad or not.

Annet dragged her out through a servants’ entrance into the side courtyard. It was already dark outside. Galeon didn’t know if it was even the same day, or how much time had passed.

When Galeon realized where they were headed, she halted and pulled her hand free.

“What’s wrong now?” Annet asked.

“I can’t go in there,” Galeon said, feeling like she might be sick.

Annet sighed. “She needs you, Sir Galeon. And she won’t be pleased if you get us both caught and killed. Now move.”

Galeon frowned again, but she let Annet shove her along.

They entered the mausoleum, footsteps echoing loudly on the smooth floor.

“Could you at least *try* to be quiet?” Annet asked, exasperation dripping from her whisper.

Galeon tried to be quieter.

They descended into the crypts. It was disorientingly brighter down below, a few torches still burning.

From the funeral.

Annet led Galeon to an alcove off the ornate bisected chamber built of cold, white marble.

A lone casket rested inside. No name or any other signifier graced the blank plaque and tomb, but Galeon knew it was Della's. She would have thrown up her grief, but nothing was left to come up. Galeon was empty.

Annet dropped Galeon's hand and moved to the casket, grabbing the thick stone lid. "Help me with this."

Galeon stared at her in horror. "I will not defile her grave."

"Oh, get over yourself. I need to reach her. Now help me or I'll make you." She flickered with a familiar green.

"So you are a witch, then."

"Don't make me regret coming back for you. Are you going to help me or not?"

Galeon hesitated. She dreaded what she would see inside, but a part of her needed to see Della again. Once more.

She moved to the casket.

"Prince Henrik must have ordered a thicker lid. I can only lift one half myself," Annet said.

Galeon gaped as the slight woman lifted a corner of the marble slab it would have taken multiple burly knights to place.

"Get the other side."

Sweat broke out on Galeon's forehead and down her back as she did. Galeon's body struggled with fatigue from the day and the immense weight of the lid, but together, they managed to lift the front end and slide it down about a shoulder's width.

"Enough," Annet panted.

Galeon looked down.

Della was as still and pale as she had been, and Galeon's heart shattered all over again.

Annet reached inside and touched Della's cheek. As she did, a faint glow resonated.

“What are you doing?” Galeon asked, panic breaking through her grief. Finally, questions she should have been asking surfaced. Galeon grabbed for Annet’s hand to pull it away, but Annet caught her wrist with her free one.

“No,” she said forcefully. “Wait.”

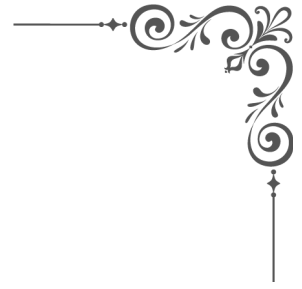
Green slipped over Della’s form and absorbed into her.

Then Galeon truly broke. She thought she saw Della’s chest rise. She thought she saw her eyelids flicker.

Galeon backed away, the world darkening and closing around her.

Della was not alive. Galeon had seen her dead.

It was a cruel trick. Another witch’s lie.



CHAPTER 25

A NEW FREEDOM

Air rushed into Della's lungs and she coughed. She hated this part.

It took a while for her body to begin working again. She twitched involuntarily and smacked her knuckles on the stone of her casket.

Annet was there, like all the times before, stroking Della's hair. Della blinked rapidly as her eyes began to clear. Her heart thundered, but then slowed and steadied.

Annet smiled down at her. "Welcome back," she whispered.

Della glanced to the other side of the stone walls enclosing her, but Galeon wasn't there. She had been there when Della had started to reattach.

Della struggled to sit up, and Annet supported her, hooking her arms under Della's and scooping her up like a child. Annet hugged her for a moment, and then helped her slide out of the narrow opening.

Della looked around.

"Where is she?" Della rasped, her throat not working correctly, but she was simply relieved to make any sound after the silence of death.

"We're already late. We must go before Prince Henrik finds out I've escaped."

"Where's Galeon?" Della repeated, still weak and clinging to her sister.

"It doesn't matter. The carriage is waiting."

"I need to see her."

"You cannot keep her, remember? She's already gone."

"Gone?" Della echoed vacantly.

"She ran. When she saw you start to come back. Just as well. No one will believe her if she tries to speak."

Galeon had run.

A fist tightened around Della's chest. Galeon had truly seen Della for what she was. And she had finally run.

Della would go after her.

“No.” Della shook her head, refusing to accept Galeon was gone.

“We don’t have time. Help me close this.”

Della was shaky, but she managed to shove beside Annet, and the lid fell back with a reverberating thud. Then Annet hauled Della through the crypt.

“Tell me where she went. Please.”

Annet glared at her. “How long has she known?”

“Since the hunt. It was an accident.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Della swallowed. “I was afraid you’d make me stay away from her.”

“Since when have I been able to make you do anything you didn’t want?”

“You would have talked sense into me, and I would have listened because I love you. And I didn’t feel like being sensible.”

Annet pulled Della into a strangling hug. “You still aren’t, you know.”

“I know. *Please*, Netty.”

Annet continued to glare. Then she huffed out a frustrated breath.

“Fine. But if we get caught, I’m blaming you.”

“Fine.”

“And next time, I get to play the princess.”

“Agreed. Now tell me where she is.”

Annet shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Where would Galeon have gone? Della had a sinking feeling she knew.

They didn’t find any sign of her outside. Or in the dark, quiet halls. Or on the stairs down to the dungeon.

She’d even closed the cell. Della had never been so glad to feel the cold press of metal against her skin as she pushed open the unlocked door.

Galeon cowered in the corner. She had her eyes closed and her arms wrapped protectively around herself as if to ward off the world.

“Galeon?”

Galeon flinched but kept her eyes screwed shut as she curled her arms over her head. “Please stop,” Galeon choked.

Della’s tears came swiftly as she tripped and stumbled forward. “Galeon, look at me,” Della pleaded. She reached out with a shaky hand and touched Galeon’s shoulder.

Galeon recoiled. “You aren’t real.”

“I am. It’s me. Look at me, please.” Della stroked Galeon’s forearm and elbow, weakly tugging. Galeon slowly lowered it, but she kept her face pressed to the wall. “It’s me. I’m here.”

Galeon’s breathing was ragged. She cracked her eyes open, glanced sideways at Della, then quickly away. Della cupped her cheek and Galeon jerked.

Her eyes returned to Della and lingered. “You’re...warm.”

“Yes.” Della shifted closer, needing to be near.

“But you died.”

“I did. That was real. And I’m back.”

Galeon stared at her, and Della held her breath. Would she reject her? Turn away after what Della had done? Try to run again?

Galeon grabbed Della, crushing Della to her chest. Della slid her arms around Galeon’s neck, loving the feeling of her. Loving her.

“Why?” Galeon asked, her voice cracking on the single word.

“I will explain, I promise.”

Then Annet was there. “We must go,” she said urgently, and Della nodded. She had to pull herself together.

“Time to go, Galeon,” Della said firmly, taking Galeon’s head in her hands and looking into her eyes. “Will you run away with me?”

The evidence of Galeon’s pain was streaked across her face. Della had done that. And she would spend a lifetime trying to make it up to Galeon. If Galeon would let her. As Della brushed the salty damp and dungeon grit from Galeon’s bruised cheek, she silently promised them both.

Della stopped breathing again, until Galeon gave her answer.

“Yes.”

Della pressed a swift kiss to Galeon’s lips, knowing she probably tasted awful after being dead all day, and then climbed unsteadily to her feet.

They fled back through the empty halls. Della held Annet’s hand and Galeon gripped Della’s other, as if afraid Della would disappear if she let her go.

The large shape of the carriage was hitched up in the darkened interior of the stables.

“You’re late,” the driver grumbled, narrowing his eyes as he looked Galeon up and down.

“She’s coming too,” Della said.

The driver frowned. “That’s not part of the plan.”

“Well, I’ve amended the plan. Prince Henrik wasn’t part of the plan either.”

“I answer to the princess, not the prince.” The driver folded his large arms. “Her Highness won’t like it.”

“Then I’ll answer for it. We’ve upheld our part of the bargain. She’s coming.”

The driver still scowled but climbed up onto the front seat as Annet, Della, and Galeon piled into the interior.

Della lay on the floor with Galeon wrapped around her. They all waited in tense silence as they rolled toward the palace gates.

The carriage slowed as a muffled exchange of voices ran outside, and then the wheels stopped. Boots crunched over gravel.

“Hide,” Annet hissed.

Della scrambled into the narrow compartment already stuffed with blankets and a few hard objects above one of the seats as Galeon did the other. Della didn’t have time to cover herself, just went still as the door opened, hoping the shadows of night would obscure her.

Annet pressed a handkerchief to her face and sobbed into it loudly, leaning toward the door.

“I can’t believe my mistress is gone!” Annet wailed. “What will become of me now?” She reached out and gripped the startled guard’s arm. “I will be disgraced in my kingdom when we return, but nothing is left for me here. I cannot stay a moment longer. What shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?”

The guard backed hastily away. “Ah, um, yes. Very sad. Safe journey.” He closed the door on a hiccupping Annet.

Della nearly toppled out of her precarious position as the carriage lurched and started moving again. Annet let out another loud wail as they passed the guard’s tower.

They rolled through the city, which was not quite asleep despite the late hour. Then Della felt the cant of the bridge, heard the rush of the river, and they were riding free, picking up speed.

Della finally let out her breath as she slipped back down from the compartment. She found Galeon in the darkness, sliding against her on the rear-facing seat.

“That was a bit dramatic, don’t you think?” Della asked her sister.

“Men hate crying women. It’s too convenient.” Annet grabbed one of the blankets Della had been sharing space with. “I’m going to try to sleep. Ignore me, but don’t be too noisy. I love you, Della, but some things a sister does not need to hear.”

Annet pulled the blanket up over her head. Della chuckled softly, relieved to be on this side of the river.

They weren’t safe yet—and perhaps they never would be—but they were not in immediate peril. Such was the life of a witch.

“Sister?” Galeon asked.

Della couldn’t see her well in the shadowed interior, so she felt her, cradling Galeon’s face, tracing her old scar and newly tender cheek. “Yes. Annet is my little sister.”

“Oh. What happened today, Della? What *is* happening?” Galeon’s voice was hoarse with hurt and confusion. Della hated that, and guilt churned through her.

“I died this morning. Then I came back. That’s what my magic does.”

“Why?”

“You remember when I told you I was lying to you?”

“Very clearly.”

“Well, I’m going to tell you now.”

Galeon tensed. “All right. I’m ready.”

“I’m not Princess Cordelia.”

Galeon was silent for too long. “You aren’t?”

“No.”

“Right. And?”

Della frowned. “And what?”

“Is that it?”

Della stared at her. “Basically...yes?”

“Oh, thank fuck.” Galeon sagged as she pulled Della close. “I thought it was going to be something bad.”

Della laughed. She shouldn’t, but it burst out of her as she clutched Galeon close. “It doesn’t change your answer? You still want to be here?”

Galeon kissed her.



GALEON WANTED TO DROWN in Della. Her frazzled heart and mind were too worn from the day. Yes, she was angry, but she would feel it another time. Later. Now, she was too overjoyed that Della was warm and breathing.

Galeon had already lost one love in this lifetime. She refused to lose another if she could help it. She held Della closer.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Galeon asked, the pain of it lancing her chest.

“I couldn’t.”

“She couldn’t,” Annet agreed, poking her head out of the blanket.
“Sorry, I’m not here.” Annet ducked back into her cocoon.

“I made a promise with the real Princess Cordelia. This was her plan, and I agreed in exchange for our freedom.”

Galeon stared at the murky outline of Della, trying to absorb the day. She was a sponge that had already been thoroughly soaked.

“You must have more questions,” Della said when Galeon didn’t speak.
“Ask me anything, and I will answer.”

“What’s your name?”

“Della.”

“But I thought that was short for Cordelia.” Galeon’s head hurt. All of her hurt.

“It’s short for Ardella.”

“Oh. Good.”

Galeon was relieved that, at least, had been true. And that she didn’t have to learn a new name. She leaned forward, pressing her face into Della’s neck. She was exhausted.

“Don’t you have more questions?”

“Probably,” Galeon mumbled, snuggling closer.

“Come here.” Della grabbed a second blanket and tucked them in, wrapping her arms and legs around Galeon. Galeon was safe. She was home.

Home. She raised her head. Lillian’s things were in the palace falling away behind them.

“What is it?” Della asked.

“I’m just...leaving everything.”

“I know.” Della stroked Galeon’s hair. “Do you want to go back?”

Galeon thought about the three items in her room. She felt the locket around her neck. That would be enough. She looked at Della. Galeon wasn’t going to throw away her future just to cling to her past.

She rested her ear over Della's heart again and held on tighter to the beautiful, infuriating, incredibly alive woman in her arms.

"Where are we going?" Galeon finally thought to ask as she started to drift into sleep.

"The carriage will take us to the coast. Then, well, anywhere we want. Somewhere far away. Our life is one of secrets and running. Are you sure you want that?"

Galeon hummed and nestled her face deeper into Della's chest. "Ask me tomorrow. But if it means I get to be with you, I will say yes."

Della let out a soft, relieved chuckle and it jostled Galeon's head. Galeon found herself joining in, though it was drawn mostly from exhausted hysteria.

"I'm sorry," Della breathed against Galeon's ear. "I'm so sorry I hurt you."

Galeon fought off the sleep trying to claim her. This was more important. Della was more important. "I might need to hear that tomorrow as well."

"If you're still here, then you will."

"I love you."

Della sucked in her breath, and then she was kissing Galeon's sleep away. "I love you too. Though I haven't had much practice, and I don't think I'm very good at it yet."

"Don't die again without telling me first and we should be fine."

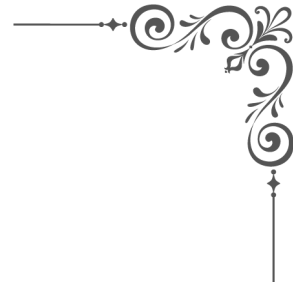
"I tried to warn you."

"I didn't listen, did I?"

"No, you didn't."

Galeon smiled into Della's kiss. The pain was there but she would look at it another day. Perhaps tomorrow. Galeon had been given a second chance, and she wasn't going to waste it on the details.

Things were entirely different now. And Galeon did not look back.



EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

Della strode through the streets of the border town as the sun threatened the horizon. Galeon hadn't arrived home, and worry battled with frustration in Della's chest as Ham wagged his tail and trotted happily by Della's side.

Della slowed, her aggravation melting away when she heard Galeon's voice, then her laugh. Della should have known.

They found her in a large, overgrown garden behind the forge, surrounded by a mob of unrestrained energy. The four children jumped on Galeon one after another, trying to take her down to the ground. Ham wagged his tail harder, slipping through the fence to join the fun.

After working as a farm laborer in the previous town, and a brief turn at being a tavern bouncer in the one before, Galeon was fortunate to have found a blacksmith in need of an extra set of hands. Galeon's current occupation, however, seemed to involve a lot more snot and a lot more giggling than her assignment called for.

Galeon managed to free the death grip of young, sharp elbows surrounding her neck and swung a little boy around, tucking him under her arm as he shrieked with merriment.

The blacksmith emerged from the doorway beside Della, his soot-smudged cheeks and singed beard curling around his smile. "Your Leon is worth her weight in gold outside the forge as much as in it."

Della sighed. "And she is late."

Galeon noticed Ham and looked up. Della folded her arms and Galeon stilled, and then stumbled as her knees were besieged by another child.

"That's enough, now," Galeon told the children, who protested loudly. "We mustn't anger my wife."

That word still caused a ridiculous flutter in Della's belly. She failed to stop the smile that spread across her face as Galeon leaned over the fence to press a quick kiss to her mouth. As she did, the second necklace she wore swung forward and brushed Della's matching one. The thin, perfect

cords of green silk had been painstakingly braided and re-braided by an adorably determined Galeon last month when they had exchanged their vows.

“We are going to be late,” Della scolded.

“Are we? I thought you said to be home by dark.”

“No, I said we would *leave* home at dark.”

Galeon rubbed her neck sheepishly. “Right. Well. It’s not dark yet, is it?”

Della huffed. “Do you want to tell my sister you were the reason we missed it? Or shall I?”

Galeon hurriedly hopped the fence, whistling. Ham came running after her, one ear up and one down. Galeon praised him, affectionately ruffling his mottled fur which grew back thicker each day. Galeon had found the stray mutt curled on their doorstep in a rainstorm several months back and brought him inside, just for one night. He had never left. Della pretended to complain, but she already adored the scruffy boy as much as Galeon did.

Galeon caught Della’s hand and the three of them made their way through the narrow dirt streets.

“How was your day?” Galeon asked.

“We got an order for two new gowns.”

Della had acquired a taste for silk during her time in the palace. She had exaggerated her sewing prowess and established herself as a seamstress, with Annet’s help. Their designs were quite daring, alarmingly overpriced, and surprisingly popular.

“The mayor visited me at the forge,” Galeon said casually.

Della stopped walking. “What? Why?”

“It’s fine, love. She heard I have a background in the army. Asked if I’d be interested in helping shape up a few new town guard recruits.”

“Which army?” Della asked, but Galeon just smiled.

“I never clarified. But if it comes up, then Alludan’s.”

“You’re getting better.”

“At what?”

“Lying.”

“Well, I have a good reason to.” Galeon brought Della’s hand up to kiss her knuckles.

The tavern was already rumbling, the low-ceilinged space crammed with too many tables and smelling of cheap spirits. Della and Galeon found an empty place near the side, but only one stool. Galeon sat, and then pulled Della into her lap, Ham curling up between Galeon’s feet.

“I’ll put your legs to sleep,” Della warned.

Galeon leaned close to murmur, “I’m counting on it. Then you’ll have to carry me home and make it up to me.”

Della smirked. “Will I?”

Galeon nodded, her arms settling naturally around Della’s waist.

As they waited, Della glanced up at the noticeboard pinned above her head. She always checked. They were ready to go at a moment’s notice if needed.

One announcement caught her eye. She still couldn’t read well, but Galeon had taught her to identify a few critical words. Della nudged her and nodded to the board, recognizing the shape of Glea.

“There is a new princess,” Galeon said, her voice quiet.

“What do you mean?”

“The queen has had a second child. Named her heir.”

“I bet the prince isn’t happy about that.”

“No, I imagine not.” A complicated set of emotions flitted across Galeon’s face.

Della reached for her hand and squeezed it. “You all right?”

Galeon met her eyes, and the emotions solidified into something fond. “Very.”

“There you are!” Annet said behind her, and Della turned, grinning. “I didn’t think you were going to come. Oh, and Ham!”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Della said. “We promised, remember?”

Annet smiled, rubbing Ham's ears, but she looked oddly nervous.

"You'll do great," Galeon assured her.

"Thanks. I mean, of course I will," Annet agreed, but she bit her lip.

"We've been acting our whole lives. A play will be a breeze," Della said.

"I know that. But for some reason, preparing ahead of time is so much more stressful. What if I forget my lines?"

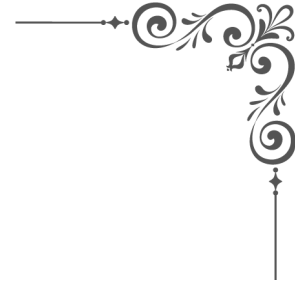
"Then make them up."

"Oh! It's starting."

Della leaned back against her wife, deeply content. They were still running. They were still lying, but not to each other, and that mattered.

Della would always be a witch. The magic called her too frequently, but with two people to love now, it was easier to ignore. Della had better things to believe than its lies.

It was an unusual happiness and an uncertain life, but they were together, so the rest were just details. And Della knew, through it all, she was thoroughly loved.



FROM THE AUTHOR

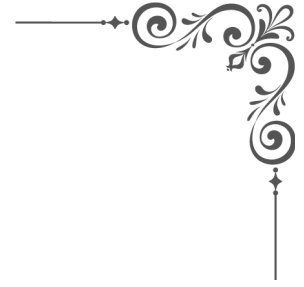
You have reached the end of this book, but this is only the first story in the Sapphic Lady Knights series! Please visit my website at mariahraebirch.com for more information and to join my newsletter, or connect with me on social media @mariah.rae.birch.

I hope you enjoyed reading *Her Pretty Knight* as much as I enjoyed creating it. If so, I ask that you take a moment to leave a review online where you received this copy, or your preferred site. Reviews really help independent authors like me.

Thank you for giving these characters life by reading!

With Love,

Mariah Rae



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all those who have encouraged and helped me make this story possible. First, to Chris, for being endlessly supportive of my writing and finding joy in life. To my critique partner and editor, Ivy L. James, for cheering me on and keeping me grounded. To my brother for being the first person in my “real” life to read this story. To my parents who told me I could do anything and taught me to follow my passion. And to readers like you.

Thank you.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mariah Rae quit her corporate job in 2022 and wrote a book. And she never stopped.

While her earliest works of fiction and art were plastered boldly to the kitchen walls in her childhood home, it took her another twenty years to gather her courage to share her stories again. Now she writes sapphic tales full of romance and magic.

An artist of many kinds, writing fills Mariah Rae's creative well to the brim. She lives near the mountains with her spouse and furry children. When not writing, she bakes, lurks in nature, and plays games with her small circle of heart family.

Read more at [Mariah Rae Birch's site](#).